

TEN COMPLETE WESTERN STORIES

FAMOUS

WESTERN ^K

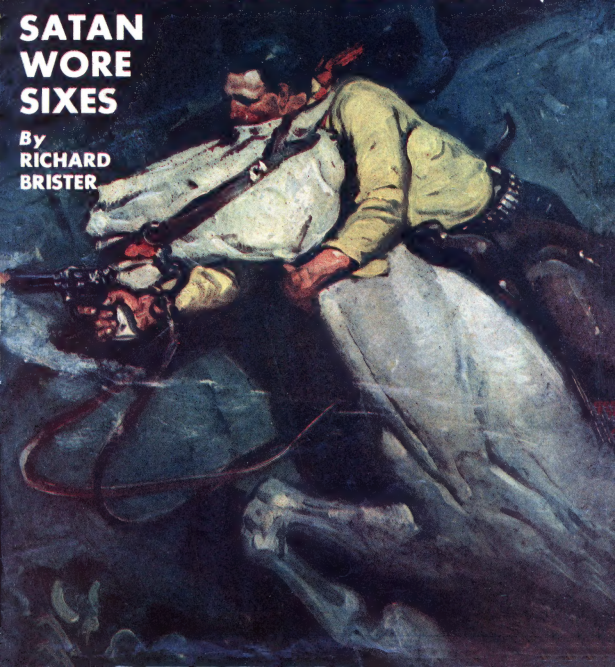


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By
**RICHARD
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FAMOUS WESTERN

Volume 8

November, 1946

Number 1

TEN COMPLETE WESTERN STORIES

- SATAN WORE SIXES (Novel)** By Richard Brister 10
Duttley had to face the hatred of young Clay, because he couldn't tell the youngster who had really killed Clay's father, Duttley's best friend before he got on the wrong side of the law.
- NESTER** By Wilbur S. Peacock 34
"Some day this country will be ruled by law rather than by men, and then it'll be a good place for living."
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A gunman should stick to guns and a sky-pilot to gospel — or should he?
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It's tough to hold a winning hand when you haven't the chips to cover your opponent's bets — that is, if you have a winning hand!
- KILLERS ALSO DIE** By Seymour Irving Richin 70
The churchbell had come from old Mexico, and for years it had rung out a message of peace and good will toward men. But now the bell stood for murder . . .

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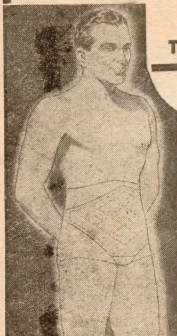
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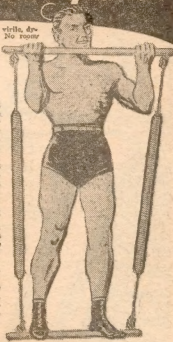
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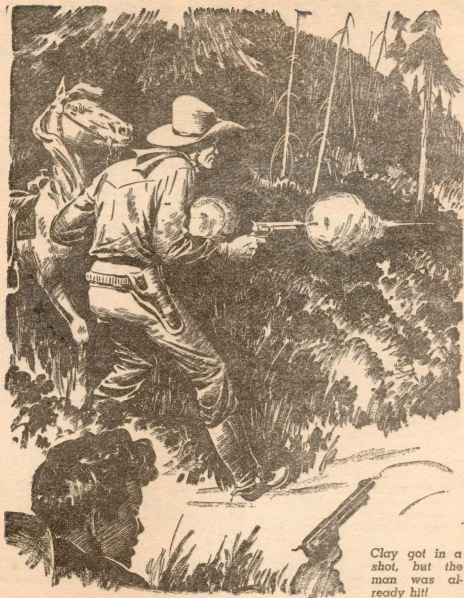
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shot, but the
man was al-
ready hit!

SATAN WORE SIXES



A POWERFUL FEATURE NOVEL

By RICHARD BRISTER

"You're a fool, kid. You go up against Drew Duttley with your precious honor and see what it gets you. A grave, is all; mark my word for it. An' when you're gone, Drew still marries your mother. Main thing's to get vengeance for your father and protect your mother; you ain't protectin' her none' from the graveyard:"

CHAPTER I

THE Saturday afternoon stage rolled into Copper City an hour late, and halted in front of Sheriff Drew Duttley's office. Drew looked up, blinking, from his *Copper Courier*, saw the angry, shock-faced mob gathering around the glaze-eyed, sweat-lathered horses and the big trailing Concord, and lowered his bootheels from his spur-scarred desk, scowling fiercely.

He moved through the doorway, a tall spare man, almost indolent-looking, but with hard gray eyes that never stopped moving, that ceaselessly studied the town he lived in, and the people he lived with. His swift glance swept the confused scene before him.

Several townmen, volunteers, were tenderly lifting the lax figure of whiskered Dan Tobbey down from the passenger compartment of the stage. The old driver had an ugly red

blotch streaming down his shirt. Dry racking coughs shook his bony frame, and blood trickled slowly from one corner of his blistered lips.

Drew felt a thrust of anger at the sight. He said in a clipped, hard tone, "Move aside there," and drove hard through the crowd. People heard the sound of that steel-edged voice and made a pathway. Drew Duttley was a cold man, a brittle man. He knew people feared him. He knew, too, that they must. He had adjusted his mind to the prospect of a friendless existence when he had accepted a lawman's badge—and the job of cleaning up Calvary County.

He saw the dude passenger who had driven the stage in, climbing down off the driver's high perch, and nodded briefly to the pale-featured fellow. "Stick around, son. May want to talk to you."

Then he knelt in the dust of the street, beside old Dan Tobbey's shattered body. His swift brown fingers explored Dan's wound. It was a heavy slug, he saw. Squarely through the lungs, but just shy of the heart. Dan's cracked, dust-brown forehead was clammy cold to the touch. His pulse, under Drew's exploring thumb, was a spasmodic tickle.

He turned, grimly staring the crowd back, and his lean, V-shaped face was a mask which covered the disgust, the hatred, the utter weariness that lay heavy within him. He waved a great arm in a peremptory arc, and said slowly, "Move back. Give him air. You, Bigger, go over to the Straight Shot an' tote back a tumbler of whisky. Dan's dying."

He saw the hesitation of Bigger George, and his wide lips smiled a little. Some imp within him had forced him to the choice of Bigger, to run that errand. Bigger George stood there, a man constructed compactly as a log, with a florid face which was all flat surface, the nose, the pig-like eyes, the flaring front teeth all jutting forward with the aggressiveness that characterized the man himself.

Now, back in the depths of the crowd, men laughed covertly, for Bigger George owned the copper mines

which gave Copper City its name, and its being. And what he did not own outright in this town, he controlled just as surely as if he had bought it. He owned the bank. He held part interests in the hotel, the three restaurants, in the dry goods and hardware stores. There was no end to the buck-toothed man's power.

With just two exceptions. He did not own Drew Duttley, for western men have in them a long streak of humor, and it pleased them to vote Drew to a new term of office in defiance of the raging, mottle-faced Bigger.

Nor did Bigger George own the Straight Shot saloon, for it was beneath his dignity to associate his grand name with such a ramshackle, odorsome hole-in-the-wall as was the Straight Shot. And there was the joke of Drew Duttley's command: to choose the great man from so many lesser personalities, to run a boy's errand.

To send Bigger George into one of the few business places in Copper City in which he was *not king-pin!*

The broken capillaries in Bigger George's florid face turned red, glowed like a lantern. His buck teeth jutted as his lips flared back, snarling, and his triple-chins shook like jelly.

"Some day, Drew," he said in his raspy rumble, "you'll go a mite too far with me." His bead-like eyes drifted right, toward the tall, hawk-faced man who flanked him on that side: Rake Davis, thin as a snake, hard and cold as a knife blade.

On the other side of the scowling mine owner, Rag Jordan stood leering at Drew. Jordan had once been shot through the mouth with a .45. The slug had killed all nerves in his lower lip. It hung down loosely, like a dragging end hanging down from a bolt of cloth. It gave Rag his name, and an ugly appearance which he took unwonted pride in. He cackled nervously now, and those about him shrunk away instinctively. His eyes danced with pleasure as he shifted his upper body like a preening peacock.

Rag was not the nitwit he appeared, Drew realized darkly. Behind that

*Nancy fumbled
with the six-
gun as Clay
and Dutley
fought!*



simpleton's mask was the heart of a ruthless killer.

Bigger George need fear no man, with two such lieutenants.

Drew met the man's pig-eyed glance and said, smiling thinly, "Fig-

gered you might want that job, Bigger. 'T wasn't my money them road agents was after. 'T was yours. . . payroll for the mines. They sure enough got it, an'—"

"And if you were any kind of a

sheriff," exploded Bigger George in a high choler, "you'd be posse-in' up right now, an' high tailin' to catch 'em! You—"

Drew was looking past the big bad wolf, ignoring the bare-fanged buck-toothed snarling. He saw a white-aproned, bald-headed man hustling through the batwings of the rickety frame building that housed the disreputable Straight Shot. The man carried a brown bottle. Drew smiled in greeting. "Thanks, Sam." He took the bottle, lifted old Dan Tobbey's limp frame to a half-sitting position, and applied the bottle between the unconscious man's sagging lips.

"Somebody'll have t' pry his teeth open," he muttered darkly, and as willing fingers moved to complete that project, he glanced up grimly at Bigger George. "Funny, ain't it, Bigger, how two minds'll work different? Me, now, I figger to jigger old Dan up a little. He just might be able to talk some, afore he cashes his chips in. I'd admire to know who he figgers done it. That dude passenger that driv' the rig in won't likely know nothin'."

He saw the hesitation in the buck-toothed man's jutting eyes, and he savored his victory. The crowd was tittering, a little, laughing callously in the presence of death, as a frontier crowd will, and they were laughing at Bigger. The big man didn't like it; he scowled down at Drew with unconcealed hatred.

Drew minded his own particular business, which was forcing some of that raw, burning liquor down the parched throat of the unconscious Dan Tobbey. He succeeded at last, and in thirty seconds, the old man jerked spasmodically, choked on a gurgling inflection, and opened his eyelids a fraction.

His eyes were opaquely white, dull and expressionless as clouds. Drew bent down and spoke gently into the whiskered driver's ear.

"Dan. . . Can you hear me? Who was it?"

The old man choked again, and blood trickled out of his mouth, dirtying his beard. Drew wiped it away with his handkerchief, and watched

the old man's face tensely. Dan groaned, breathed once with wheezy effort, and mumbled: "Only seen . . . one . . . of 'em, Drew. I . . . I give him a scrap fer the strong box . . . like a dang' ol' numbskull. . . ripped his han'ka'chief off'n 'is face, afore he plugged me. . ." The old man coughed and spat blood-streaked spittle again. Drew wiped Dan's beard and said tensely,

"Who, Dan? Who was it?"

The old man's eyes fluttered. "This is. . . gunna be. . . tough on you, Drew. It was. . . Clay Burrows. . ." The watery eyes glazed with this final expenditure of wavering strength. Drew felt the limp frame go even limper in his arms, saw the dull set of Dan Tobbey's features, and set the old man back gently.

THE dusty street seemed to be rocking beneath him, and a clammy sweat broke along his brown wrists. It seemed that his world had come apart at the seams, with the old man's death pronouncement. Clay Burrows! It was a slap in the face, a crippling kick to the groin, and he could feel the watchful eyes of the crowd upon him, feel the weight of their understanding and pity.

His was a brittle ego, and he did not want that, no matter how well he deserved it. He had constructed around himself an impenetrable shell of hardness, for it was toughness of soul alone, he knew, which could keep him alive, an independent man, and a lawman, in Bigger George's kingdom of Copper City.

But Clay. . . this was the ultimate strain to his stern foundations. He'd grown up with Clay. On this very street in this very town they had played hopscotch, rolled hoops, plagued drunks, tossed pebbles and handfuls of dust into the open windows of dude-bearing stages. They had harried the same school teacher almost to death, poor Miss Priddings with her horn-rimmed spectacles and her black transformation.

They had been inseparable as peas in a pod, and always, Clay, with his reckless laugh, with his dancing brown eyes full of the devil, had led



Duttley knew, now, how Bigger George planned to end him

the mischief. He'd been a wild frisky one by nature, Clay had, and coming to maturity had not changed him. He would always be wild, always romantic, and—Drew's forehead crinkled—always a gay dashing figure to catch the eye of the ladies.

Drew thought of Nancy, and his tense scowl deepened. Then an unwonted softness crossed his stern features. From the first day Nancy had stepped into the school room, he had known, he had felt that same softness deep within him. Nancy Morey was

all things a man rightly admired in a girl, a fine laughing-eyed oval-faced girl with long corn-yellow curls, with slender quick legs, a soft rounded figure, and above all, a high gift of loyal friendship and honest, manlike directness.

The whole town laid down a carpet of friendship and affection for Nancy, and many had loved her, but none had gone head-over-heels quite as badly as had Drew—and Clay Burrows.

Clay's brashness, his reckless charm, had won the nod for him, as it must have. Drew was too quiet, too reserved by nature, to stand against him. But the three-way friendship between them all had stuck firm down the years. Now Clay and Nancy had a grown son, a fine boy of sixteen—and still Drew loved Nancy Burrows, in his brooding, secretive fashion.

He felt a clutching dread in his stomach. *Clay, Clay*, he was thinking, *why did you do it?* And he thought, *Lord, poor Nancy!*

He could feel the crowd's eyes probing down at him, through him, reading his brooding thoughts, dragging him from deep reverie back to the grim realities of the present. He heard Rag Jordon cackle foolishly at him, saw the hawk-faced Rake Davis sneer at him. And between the pair of cold-eyed killers, Bigger George, standing block-like, a straight up-and-down trunk of a man, massive, foreboding, his buck teeth flaring like short tusks.

"Seems like," Bigger rumbled in his throaty voice, "you wasn't as smart as you thought you was, Sheriff." He made a dry jibe of the "Sheriff." "Seems like you'd done better to saddle an' ride, like I was suggestin'. Might've bluffed your way clear, that-a-way." The three chins swung down like tent flaps as the big man cackled. "Seems like you ain't got no choice now, but to bring in Clay Burrows."

Rag Jordon fondled his rag-dangling lower lip, and lisped toothlessly, "Fer hangin'."

DREW'S weary thoughts were not in the present, but Rag Jordon's curt addition to Bigger's statements

made him wince, lose the iron control that was his corner foundation. Was ever a man more sorely tried? he wondered. He was thinking of Nancy. He could not force the vision of her lovely, smiling face from him.

He could not hurt Nancy Burrows. There was a limit to the strict confines a man's duty imposed on his conscience. They *would* hang Clay. No doubt about that whatever. The whole crowd had heard Dan Tobbey's dying pronouncement. That crazy, wild Clay Burrows had joined a band of road agents, and killed old Dan. This town would want vengeance; they would have it, too.

If Drew failed them, they would seek justice in their own crude fashion. Drew shuddered at the memory of lynchings he'd seen, as a younger. That, he knew, would be brutal, even harder for Nancy.

Bigger George sent a side glance toward snake-thin Rake Davis, and grinned blandly at Drew. "Well, Sheriff?"

Drew stood there, ignoring the man, alone with his private thoughts.

Bigger George said angrily, "You've got a reputation for hardness in this town, Sheriff. I hear people say they voted you in because you knew your lawman's duty, an' never compromised with it. I hear it told how you're tough. I hear how you was blinded once in a gunfight, how you couldn't see nothin' for two solid weeks, an' developed a sort of a sixth sense, bein' able to feel trouble, or smell it, or see it, with eyes in back of your head."

Bigger George spat. He had his audience craning around him to hear him better, and he continued to recite Drew's virtues, for the single crafty purpose of softening Drew's prestige up a little, the better to drive home a Sunday punch.

"I hear," he rumbled on throatily, "how there was three sheriffs in one year in this town, till the great Drew Duttle took over. I hear how twenty men have tried to kill this same great Drew Duttle, an' got planted in Boot Hill. I hear it said there ain't nobody else can tame Copper City. And . . . you know what I call all them

things I been sayin'?" He looked a question around at the shifty-eyed crowd, and when none dared to provide the query he wanted, he nudged Rag Jordan.

Rag jerked his flap lip, showing a lower jaw devoid of teeth—they'd been taken off cleanly by the .45 slug which had disfigured the gunman—and said quickly, "What, boss?"

"Hogwash!" Bigger George exploded. "I call them things hogwash." He waved a block-like arm at the body of Dan Tobbey. "Here lies a dead man," he announced sententiously. "He's just spoke out the name of his killer, for all to hear. That self-same killer is probably high-tailin' it right out of this county now, an'—" the meaty arm jerked in a disgusted gesture at Drew "—an' there," he growled, "stands the man who calls himself this county's sheriff, chewin' his lip, whiles—"

Drew said through gritted teeth, "One word, Bigger."

The man's mouth went slack. The buck teeth glinted. "Huh?"

"You think you own Copper City," Drew said almost idly. "You nearly do. You don't own me, friend. One more yap through those buck teeth, Bigger, an' by Gawd—"

"Listen, here. . . you ca—"

Drew came up on his left foot and swung his right arm in a short dancing arc. He did not close his hand. He let his calloused palm smack the big man's red cheek smartly. There was a staccato sound, like muffled gunfire. Bigger George stood frozen, a great startled statue.

Drew saw the instinctive pulling back of Rag Jordan and Rake Davis. They wanted room; they were falling into the side-stance of born killers. Drew faced them dead ahead. His left arm had flicked at his hip even as he slapped the mine owner. His gun glinted brightly in the sun's high light.

"Turn around, boys," he drawled gently. "The law's talking."

Rag Jordan's mishapen face was livid with fury. Rake Davis hissed like the snake he resembled. Bigger George stood panting, while his fat fingers explored the white blob

Drew's palm had left on his florid cheek. He spat through his buck teeth, to display his defiance. "You're holding the cards this deal, Sheriff. Next time. . . I deal 'em."

He turned haughtily on his log-like legs and stalked away, a solid, dignified figure so powerful here in Copper City that such a defeat could not shatter his grandeur. Rag Jordan and Rake Davis tagged at his heels, like obedient hound dogs.

Drew Duttley watched the trio through narrow eyes, feeling the first stirrings of fear within his lank frame since he had originally clipped on his lawman's star. He had done an improvident thing. He had always bucked Bigger George in this town, but now it was sure to be open warfare between them. He felt the dregs of hopelessness dragging within his stomach, and fought to shake off the feeling.

He squared his wide shoulders and stepped through the curious crowd. "Somebody take Dan down to Doc Semple's," he sighed wearily, and moved toward his big black gelding which was tied in front of his combination office and jailhouse.

"Where you goin', Drew?" a man asked with the strained voice of inquisitiveness.

"To get Clay Burrows."

"If y' want some help. . ." the man fumbled.

"No. . ." Drew said thoughtfully. "It's a one man job, the way I look at it."

CHAPTER II

THE BLACK gelding—whom Drew had long ago named 'Smoky'—had an easy long stride that covered the ground with deceptive speed. Within less than a half hour Drew was on the yucca-dotted plain through which the trail led down over a shallow creek ford, then up the opposite bank to the Burrows ranch house.

Drew rode limp in the saddle, his head down like a tired beast of burden. The last time he had ridden this trail, he had been coming as a friend to the Burrows place, for an evening

of cards with Nancy and Clay, and their fine youngster, Clay, Jr. His heart had always filled at the prospect of an evening basking in Nancy's presence—though he carefully veiled his feelings toward her—and he had been fond of Clay, too. . .

The brutal shock of this thing would not wear easily off him. Clay had been wild, crazy reckless. Drew had always known that, and had cottoned to those irresponsible, lazy characteristics in Clay which were in such great contrast to his own stern, more work-a-day outlook.

But a lazy hand makes a poor one for ranch work. Clay's signs were on this land of his like a billboard—the thin-ribbed cattle grazing in worked-out pasture. Clay should have moved them to fresh range long since. There were broken wires in the fence that cried out to heaven for a hand and a pair of pliers to patch them.

Even the bunkhouse roof needed patching. Shingles lay on the ground beneath it, and the barn showed streaks of light from the setting sun through it. How Clay's poor stock must shiver in the cold blows of mid-winter!

No, Clay was no rancher. Some said he was slowly losing even his land to the bank in Copper City. Drew felt the hurt of that, for the sake of Nancy. But that was as nothing compared to the hurt of this thing Clay had done to repair his fortunes. To go on the owlhoot. To kill a man, a well-liked old timer like Dan Tobbey—Clay must hang for that, surely.

And then what was to become of his beloved Nancy?

Well, a man who wore the badge of a sheriff had his own cut-and-dried duty to think of. The first sign of softness in Drew would encourage the jackals who were constantly yapping behind him, seeking some way to rid themselves of him. This had been a lawless county, when he had taken over. Copper City was yet to be tamed. Bigger George and his hired hoodlums made trouble aplenty, but the day of indiscriminate killing and plunder was finished. Drew had seen to it.

And the minute he was gone, the old rule would come back. It was not pride in him, that recognized that; it was a man's trained knowledge. He was that town, the key to its future just as surely as Bigger George was. Bigger George owned the mines and paid out the wages, but he got every cent back in his chain of saloons, in the bank he held stock in, in his general stores. His faro layout earned him thousands of dollars each week-end. No wonder, then, that he preferred his town lawless—and hated Drew Duttley.

For Drew meant to lift Copper City up to a higher standard, a more decent town for the women and children.

They knew it, in town. They hugged themselves around the legend of his invincibility, his indestructible hardness. While Drew remained in the sheriff's office, the forces of Bigger George gained no ground; there was hope in the people.

He couldn't let them down; he had said he was going to get Clay Burrows and bring him to trial. He was a man with a strong sense of duty, even as shrewd Bigger George had described him.

HE WOULD do his duty. He would put the thing straight up to Nancy. He would say what he knew, from the dead lips of Dan Tobbey, that Clay had killed him. He would explain that Clay hadn't a chance—nor did he—no matter where he had run to. He would put his cards down, face up, for Nancy, and ask her not where Clay was, but to talk to Clay, to make him come in.

It would be sure death for Clay if this came to a posse, with jittery men riding a live trail and fondling hair triggers. But if he came in of his own volition, if he stood his trial, there was a fair chance of prison for him. This town had always liked Clay. . . they would be loathe to hang the reckless, smiling husband of Nancy Burrows.

Thinking these things, he arrived at the house, and would have gone on to the doorway, but just then it swung open. Clay Burrows stepped

out on the stone-floored portico and nodded pleasantly to him. A slender, smiling man, with hair the color of sandstone, with a clear white complexion that belied his thirty-nine years, that gave no hint of the tension he must be feeling.

"Evenin', Drew," he said, somewhat short of breath. "You over for poker?"

Drew sighed and gently avoided the issue. "Where's Nancy?"

"Kitchen." Clay waved a limp arm. "When she knows we got a guest, she'll come runnin'." He turned to call, but Drew cut in quickly.

"No. Hold it."

Clay stared straight at him with disturbed, guarded eyes. "You look het up about somethin'."

"Am," Drew said, and nodded toward the gunbelt and holstered six strapped around Clay's thin waist. "When'd you take to packin' an iron, Clay, for settin' around the house of a Saturday evenin'?" He stepped forward abruptly, flicked a hand out, and neatly extracted Clay's gun from the holster.

Clay stood like a statue. Only the flashing eyes in the pale, youngish face showed emotion and movement. He said caustically, "I don't defend myself from guests, Drew. You know that, don't you?"

Drew sighed, and swore a little, and said wearily, disgustingly, "Clay, I hate this. A passenger druv the stage into town an hour late, this after. Dan Tobbey lived; Clay, after you. . . after the fracas. He talked. Hull town was on hand t' hear him say it was you that plugged him . . . I'm—I'm takin' you in, Clay."

There was a long, painful moment during which the two pairs of eyes locked with each other in flat focus. Clay's chest was jerking with the force of his short breathing. "Mebbe," he suggested slowly, "mebbe I'm like the architect, Drew. Mebbe I got other plans. . ."

Drew said without smiling, "I'm sorry, Clay. More than I can say. But a man has his duty."

Some of the implacable hardness within him must have shown in his voice and manner. Clay's eyes shifted

from him. Fear hung like a mantle on Clay Burrows. "Drew. . . I've been dumb. . . a fool. I'll admit it But nobody knows . . . I mean—I could ride. I could hit out for the border. We've seen a lot of this life together. We—"

DREW said with a deep sigh, "I always liked you, Clay. Always will, for that matter. Dan's dead; you can't change it. The town's het up some bad. First off, I figured it'd mean the noose for you, Clay. But a lot of folks back there are strong for you. You'll do better to stand trial, an'—"

"No!" Clay blurted, losing control. "No, Drew, I—" He was getting hysterical by degrees. Drew read the signs, and a small wad of disgust took form within him. He pulled Clay's own gun out from under his belt, and pointed it negligently at his friend.

"Stop that, Clay. I mean business."

Clay sobered. He shrugged limply, said in a dead voice, "Does a man get a chance to say goodbye to his wife . . . Sheriff? Or—"

And then Nancy Burrows stood framed in the doorway behind her husband. There was dough on the creamy skin of her bare forearms, and she was wiping a wisp of corn-colored hair off her lovely face. There was a shocked, uncomprehending expression about her luminous, sky-blue eyes, and her lips hung open slightly.

"Goodbye?" she stammered. "Clay . . . what is it? Drew! Put that gun down!"

Drew hardened himself against the sound of her voice. He would not permit himself to see the picture she made there. He froze his hard glance on Clay, and said wearily, "Come on, Clay."

"Clay!" sputtered Nancy. "What . . ."

Clay said slowly, "Nance. . . I. . . I killed a man. . . when you thought I was riding fence this after. O-old Dan Tobbey. He—he was drivin' the stage, and. . . Nance. . . Nance. . . we just had to have money. I've made a muddle of things, mebbe . . . but . . ."

"You—killed Dan Tobbey?" She was staring sickly at him, her face blank with horror. She turned her

tearful glance toward Drew. "Drew . . . you can't. . . you wouldn't. . ."

Drew said, "Coming, Clay?" He jerked the gun, nodded. Clay stepped forward. Nancy was screaming, "No, Drew. No!" She came swiftly to him, between them. She was all loyalty, all character, was Nancy Burrows. She knew only that her husband was in trouble; she must intercede for him.

She pushed Drew's gun hand aside and said sharply, "Run, Clay. . . run!"

And Clay would have. The reckless, irresponsible bravado of the man had evaporated, now that a real tight had finally caught up with him. He was all fear, all frightened self interest and staring-eyed panic. He jerked away. Drew said with infinite disgust, "I never thought you'd come down this low, Clay." He dropped Clay's gun and reached out for the man with talon-like hands. He did not want gunplay with this friend of long standing; he knew that quite surely.

He grabbed Clay, and it was like holding a thrashing calf for the branding iron. Drew's strength was such that Clay could only squirm within Drew's massive bear hug, and fret and struggle and whimper a little. Drew held him thus and said gently, "Calm down, son. There's no other—"

Clay's back was to him. Clay lifted one leg sharply and drove back at Drew's shinbone. Clay wore spurs and the sharp steel slid easily through Drew's boot, cut hot through his leg. He winced instinctively, and loosened his grasp of the smaller man's body. Clay struggled free and would have run like a mouse from a cat. But in one angry lunge, Drew caught him, swung him.

There was a blinding flash and a loud explosion not ten feet away. Nancy stood there defiantly, Clay's gun grasped firmly in both hands. She was swaying a little, hysterical.

Drew heard Clay grunt, draw a rasping breath. He felt Clay's body go limp within his great arms. Sticky blood made a wet stream on his wrist. He let Clay down gently. His eyes narrowed bleakly as he saw the red spot on Clay's shirt front. The man was not dead. But he was dying. He

was as good as dead, Drew realized numbly, and turned his blank gaze toward Nancy.

She looked like a wild woman. Her eyes were staring, almost lifeless. She was staring down unbelievably at the gun in her hands, saying, "I . . . I killed him. I . . . killed Clay."

"Nancy." He would have walked toward her, but he saw her stiffen, saw the burning hatred straighten her sagging body. The gun came up and pointed squarely at him.

"I meant. . . you," she said. "He. . . he was my husband." Her voice lashed out at him, "I hate you . . . I hate you."

Drew said harshly, "Put it away, Nancy. Put that gun away. . . hear me?"

She would have killed him, in the heat of her passionate hatred, he realized. But the gun was not cocked; she could not force the hammer back against the hard thrust of the trigger. At least, Drew thought, not quickly.

HE TOOK two long strides, grasped her small wrist, and shook the gun away from her. And Nancy swore at him, then, like a little frontier lady. Drew smiled his hard smile, and admired her for finding the proper words to fit such a hellish occasion, and felt a gut-wrenching sympathy for her, because in his heart of hearts he loved her, and had loved her husband.

He said inadequately, "There jest ain't no words for this, Nancy. I'd as soon cut off an arm as see this happen. I—"

"Get away, Drew. Hurry. Before. . . before I . . ."

There was the sound of running footsteps, somewhere behind. Drew turned warily. It was Clay, Jr. The boy had his dead father's slimness, and some of that selfsame coltishness that had been Clay's final undoing, but there was also a lot of Nancy in him. A streak of uncompromising loyalty, several yards wide—the same trait that had just caused Nancy to try to shoot Drew, during that fatal scuffle.

The boy stared at his father, and

looked from Drew to his mother, wild-eyed. "Dad! . . . Mother, is he . . ."

"Yes. . ." Nancy had her face in her hands. She stood bent over, beaten, pathetic.

"Who?" grated the boy, his eyes flashing wildly. "Who did it?"

Nancy started to whimper gently. "Clay . . . darling . . . I—"

Drew cut in quickly, "I did it, son," he announced. "I shot your father."

Clay stared at him. "You?"

"I—I had to. He robbed the afternoon stage; he killed Dan Tobbey. He refused to come to town with me. I had to—"

"I'll kill you," the boy screamed. "I'll kill you." He ran at Drew, his fists clenched. His face had turned crimson with outraged hatred. Drew pointed the father's gun at the son, and said wearily,

"I don't doubt it, Clay . . . I don't doubt it." He saw the boy stop in the face of the gun. He had given the boy's shattered young pride a brief exercising, he thought glumly. He saw that Clay was not going to be silly. He took one long last look at Nancy. Then he turned and went down the flagstone walk, to where Smoky was tethered. "I'll send Doc Semple out with the rig," he called back to the stricken pair, as he mounted.

The answer came from the boy, and it was a long time coming.

"I'll kill you, Drew," Clay gritted. "I'll kill you!"

DREW went to the funeral. The whole town went to Clay Burrows' funeral. Nancy was there, sobbing pathetically in sober black, the heavy veil hiding her tear-streaked face from the curious eyes. Clay, Jr., stood like a stalwart young rock beside her. Her face was hard. His black eyes focused straight ahead, with unwanted grimness.

"He's aged two years overnight," Drew heard a townsman remark. "He'll have to take over the ranch. . . and he'll have both hands full, the way Clay left things."

Bigger George stood out like a show horse in a corral full of donkeys,

flanked by the snake-like Rake Davis and cackling Rag Jordan. The big mine owner was dressed in his Sunday finest. He made no concessions at all to the soberness of the occasion; he was, as usual, loud-mouthed, aggressively high-spirited, preeningly self-conscious, playing his role of important man to the limit.

It made Drew slightly sick to his stomach.

Toward the end, he was steeling himself to say something to Nancy. It would be, he realized, a ticklish scene. He could not bear to hurt her further by being tactless. He stood moodily in the thick of the crowd around the grave, half-hearing the minister's sonorous incantations, struggling to find the right words for Nancy.

Then a voice whispered behind him: "Havin' a hard man for sheriff's one thing. Havin' a cold-blooded killer's another, you want my opinion."

Drew swung in a fractional pivot and used his trained reflexes to catch the speaker in a momentary flick of the eyeball. This was his special skill, his stock in trade as an impregnable lawman. He had received abnormally sensitive ears and eyes, as a free gift of nature. He could hear what other men failed to, and it was said in town he could look through Old Baldy. He smiled thinly now, at thought of the legend.

But it was true, what Bigger George had once said, that Drew had a sixth sense, an ability to see behind him, to feel the presence of enemies near him. It had saved his skin countless times, in gun fights.

Now he caught a brief glimpse of the detractor behind him, and saw the man for hawk-faced Rake Davis. Davis was talking to a short, dumpy townsman, and the other stood nodding agreement.

"Does seem a might crusty. They was thick as fleas all their lives. Seems like he could've brung Clay in without gunplay. An' if there wa'n't no other way but to shoot him, seems like there wa'n't no reason to kill him."

"Right through the heart," Rake Davis said harshly. "Sheriff's too gun

handy to've meant any different. He went out there *meanin'* t' kill him."

"I reckon," the townsman said darkly.

"Thing is," Rake Davis rattled on persuasively, "s'posin, jest by some fluke, fer instance, Clay wasn't guilty. Like mebbe Old Dan was mistaken about recognizin' him. Then what, I ask you?"

"Well—"

"I'll tell you," put in Rake Davis. "Then Drew's dead wrong; he's kilt the wrong party. That's the trouble with his kind of quick justice. Clay deserved a fair trial, but never got it. Next time, it could be you or me, see? S'posin' it looked like we done something, an' we hadn't, but Drew come t' get us, same way he got Clay. That ain't my partic'lar idee of justice. Nor my idee of a sheriff."

Drew looked about the crowd and saw Rag Jordan earnestly talking to another townsman, across the grave and beyond his own earshot. He finally found Bigger George, and the mine owner was working as hard, and persuasively as his two surly henchmen.

"He'll get me," Drew thought bleakly. "He said he'd be dealing the next hand. He's not giving up, not by a long shot!"

IT WAS working, Drew saw. And it surely must, for the frontier mind has a strong sense of friendship. These townsfolk believed he had shot Clay Burrows, the friend of his childhood; for that they could never forgive him. And Drew's hands were tied. He had sworn in his soul he would never admit to any man that it was Clay's wife, Nancy Burrows, who had accidentally shot him.

He could not do that to Nancy, no matter what she felt toward him. He could not teach young Clay to doubt his own loyal feelings toward his mother.

The steady *thug-thug* of the shovels gave way to a series of dull slapping sounds as the earth was tamped down atop the new grave mound. Slowly the crowd dispersed. Nancy and Clay, Jr., were moving through a

pathway provided for them toward where their carriage was waiting.

Drew hastened to overtake them. He still did not know quite what he meant to say. But he must, he knew, say something, in view of his long friendship with Clay, in view of his own long-suppressed feelings toward Nancy. He reached the carriage just in time to take Nancy's elbow, to hand her up, and he blurted out the first words that came to him.

"It's a hard world we live in, Nancy . . . He was . . ."

At the first sound of his voice, she went stiff beside him. She had not known who held her arm, he saw now. She jerked away from him, and the boy hovered beside him, hard-eyed, sullen. Nancy said coldly,

"The world's not so hard as the men in it, Drew Duttley." She turned her back to him. The boy said through his teeth,

"Get away from my mother."

"Now. . ." Drew said. "Now. . . let's . . ."

"Get away from here, damn you! Can't you see how she feels?"

Drew shrugged, sighing deeply. He said, "Nancy, I have to talk to you. I'll come to the ranch. . . say, in a month. Goodbye till then, Nancy."

The boy spoke for his mother. "You'll make no social calls our way, Sheriff. So. . . unless it's business—" He hesitated, and shame colored the smooth young cheeks.

Drew felt a quick sympathy. The boy thought Drew wanted to question his mother, about the hold-up, the whereabouts of the missing strong box that Clay had helped steal. It was hard on the youngster, with so many eyes watching. Drew sighed, and said what he had to.

"It is business, Clay."

He doffed his hat to Nancy, as Clay helped her into the carriage. Then they were gone and he turned to face the eyes of Bigger George. Rake Davis stared impassively, and on Bigger's right, Rag Jordan pulled at his rag of a lip, and cackled without mirth. Bigger said, smiling,

"Gettin' hard as nails, ain't you, Sheriff?"

Drew looked at the man, scowling. "Say what you're thinking, Bigger. I never cottoned to riddles."

BIGGER showed the buck teeth, and his three chins shook like jelly. "I'm thinking you're gettin' a mite too hard, Sheriff. I'm thinkin' if you was as smart at trackin' down thieves as they say, you'd've found who was in with Clay on that hold-up long afore this."

Drew said defensively, for the crowd's benefit, "It's been three days..."

"That's right," Bigger George chimed in smoothly. "Three days. Three days since you shot down Nancy's husband in cold blood, Sheriff." He paused, to test Drew's reaction, and Drew held himself stiffly silent, remembering his defenselessness, his duty to Nancy. Bigger took heart and rattled on harshly, "Three short days, while she cries her heart out, Sheriff. Hardly time for a sensitive girl like Nancy to catch her breath, y' might say, an'..."

"If you've got a point, Bigger," Drew gritted, "come to it. Quick."

"I'm talkin'. I say you ain't such great shakes as a sheriff. That's all. Or you'd find some other way to track down my money."

"You were insured against loss of that strong box," Drew said coldly.

"I'm thinkin' of Nancy. I figure it's right shameful, you havin' t' bother a poor widow woman not a minute after she's watched her dead husband put under."

"She was my friend," Drew said, and wondered at the defensive attitude he had unconsciously taken. It was the crowd, he realized. They were swinging solidly against him. He shook off the moment of weakness and said in a hard voice, "I know my duty in this town, friend. I'm not apologizin' to you, or to—"

Bigger George cut in craftily, angrily, "Then find them owlhooters, Sheriff. An' quit botherin' Nan Burrows! Reckon she made it clear for all eyes to see, what her feelin' is towards you. You stay clear of Nan Burrows!"

The crowd rumbled a grumbling

assent, and Bigger George stood quiet a moment, savoring the sound, testing the effect of his words. Then he smiled toothily and walked away, flanked by the ever-present Rake Davis and Rag Jordan.

Drew stared after the trio with a baffled expression. He could feel the crowd's strong resentment toward him, in this moment. He knew that the scene had resulted in victory for Bigger George. But he shrugged off the hopelessness that climbed through him.

He had said he would call on Nancy a month from today. Neither Bigger George's dark threats, nor the hired guns of Rake Davis and Rag Jordan, nor the town's heavy resentment, would sway him. He would be as good as his promise.

For it seemed to Drew that Bigger George had taken special pains to keep him away from the Burrows ranch house!

And Bigger George was a man of caution, of purpose, a man whose every move on life's checker board had its certain motive!

Bigger George, moving down from the burying grounds on his blocky legs, between Rag Jordan and Rake Davis, was chuckling harshly.

Rag Jordan glanced at him obliquely and said, "Things are workin' out good, hey, Boss?"

Bigger laughed outright, his buck teeth flashing. "We got him," he announced flatly. "This time we've got him!"

"Huh?" His lieutenants stared doubtfully at him.

"When he rides out there to see Nancy," Bigger George chuckled. "That's when we'll nail him!"

"B-but—"

"He's in love with her," said Bigger, and rubbed his hands happily against each other. "Until today, I never realized it."

"But—" Rake Davis looked puzzled. "You told him not to go out there, Boss. You..."

"Use your head," Bigger scoffed harshly. "Of course I told him not to go. He's a fool, and in love, and he's bound to go, all the more surely since I told him not to." The big man

laughed, and his three chins danced with huge pleasure. "Oh, he'll go. You can count on it. At least, he'll start. . . but he'll never get there." He sent a crafty side glance at Rake Davis. "Reckon you'll see to that part of it, hey, Rake?"

The snake-like man blinked rapidly, then permitted a slow smile to twist his lean features. "Why, sure," he said. "Sure, Boss!"

CHAPTER III

DREW had a six o'clock dinner at the Charlton House, bathed and dressed in his best 'visiting' clothes, and hit the trail for the Burrows ranch about seven.

Smoky loped along swiftly, steadily, and the ground slid past in a haze, for Drew's heart was full of the prospect of seeing Nancy, and he rode in a dream. He had not seen her since that day a month past, at Clay's funeral, 'though she'd been much in his thoughts.

Once he had seen the boy in town, buying supplies. He had wanted desperately to speak to the boy, to learn something first hand of Nancy, how the ranch was doing, without Clay to supervise. . .

But the boy was proud. Clay, Jr., had coldly turned his back on him, ignored him. And Drew had not pressed him. He remembered the boy's blind rage at the ranch, that awful day, remembered how the boy had gritted fiercely, "I'll kill you, Drew. . . I'll kill you!"

Some day, maybe, the youngster could be made to understand. Until then—Drew shrugged—it was a thing with which you had to go slowly. Time was the cure-all, for youthful passions.

The trail wound dizzily through thick knots of scrub pine, hugging the foot of the mountain. It was a gloomy ride, and the moon shone down bleakly. Drew shuddered a little, shaking himself, horse-like, against the early fall of cold dew. He felt better, and yet—there was a faint scent of danger bathing the trail, his trained sixth sense told him.

Now the trail wound down a steep dry wash, flanked by high walls of

gravel and stone, a natural sluice cut into the face of the mountain. Even in the absorption of his thoughts of Nancy, he sensed danger here, and he rode stiff in the saddle, clucking encouragement to Smoky, who walked down the stony incline on stiff legs, nervously jerking his head back from moment to moment.

And then it came, the thing he had been half expecting. It came in the form of a huge round boulder, dislodged from the higher ground to the right of the dry wash. Whoever dislodged it had stationed himself some one hundred feet behind Drew, well back in the wooded shadows, and he had chosen his moment with caution and craft.

The boulder struck the bottom of the wash, wedged there a moment, then careened wildly, swiftly, with a crash and thunder of sound, down the steep incline toward where Drew sat astride the panic-struck Smoky.

Drew did not wait to look back. His keen ears read the meaning of that sound. He said into Smoky's ear, "Steady. . . steady, old son!" He yanked on the rein, turning the black's head up the steep, shale-strewn side wall of the wash.

There were, he knew, only a couple of seconds to work in. He could have abandoned the horse, but that sort of cruelty and disloyalty was not in him. He kicked the horse hard on the flanks, turned him fiercely against the slippery footing of that sharply angled rise.

Smoky dug his forelegs in the soft stuff, and tried for a footing. He thrashed earnestly, trying to drag himself upward. His feet kept slipping down; he made no progress.

Drew cast a worried eye back, saw that boulder coming with a growing thunder of sound and destruction. It grew larger, larger, like a snowball of monstrous proportions, and Drew thought, "Well, then, it's hopeless. It's no use. We're—" A thought came to him, and he suddenly turned Smoky's head downtrail again, and spurred him forward.

DOWN the trail about forty more yards was a sharply-angled turn which Drew well remembered. The

left hand wall of the deep little dry wash was not very high there. If . . . if Smoky could round that bend before the boulder was fully upon them, the boulder just might have sufficient momentum to refuse the turn, to skim out over that low wall, toboggan-like.

It was the only chance, Drew realized. He clucked to the black, kicked him hard on the rump, and gave him free rein. The animal was a mountain goat, with night eyes like a cat, and almost human in his capacity for understanding.

He scrambled down the steep incline, half sliding, half running in this weird night race to defeat the intent of that murderous boulder. Drew crouched low over the horn, clucking to gentle the horse, like a jockey.

But the boulder gained, as it must. Drew knew a moment of real panic, feeling chips from the great stone murder weapon fly ahead and strike him. Then the turn came. He pulled Smoky's head, and the smart beast skidded frantically around the turn.

There was a great thud behind, a groan as of great weight trying to reach a decision. He looked back, perspiring, and saw the huge stone balanced precariously atop the rim of the wash. It stood there a full second, then toppled outward, and went crashing down into the woody reaches of the outer foothills, singing its clattering song of death and destruction.

Drew pulled Smoky in and talked gently to him, all the while stroking the animal's sweat-streaked coat. He was perspiring freely himself, he realized. It had been too close. . . too close.

There was in him no slightest doubt who had tried to kill him. The fine Italian hand of Bigger George was here indicated, though of course, the fat, buck-toothed mine owner would have entrusted the actual work of bush-whacking to one of his lieutenants, either Rake Davis or Rag Jordan.

It was futile, Drew realized, to try to find the man now, in this blanket of darkness. He moved on slowly toward the Burrows ranch house. A month ago he had told Nancy Bur-

rows to look for him, this night. He still meant to see her. Not only because she was the only woman he had ever honestly cared for, but because curiosity impelled him also.

In a month's time, he had unearthed no clue as to the identity of the men who had worked with Clay on that fatal hold-up of the Saturday stage. Or as to the present whereabouts of the pay-roll money the men had stolen. Maybe Nancy could help him.

Bigger George had been insured, had lost nothing. He liked the fact that Drew had done nothing constructive. It was a talking point for Bigger against him. Maybe that, Drew thought coldly, was why Bigger George had wanted to keep him from Nancy.

He came, after a half hour's easy riding, to the Burrows ranch house. There was a dim light burning, and he tethered his horse and moved quickly to the door. He took a deep breath, tried to still the pound of his heart, and knocked firmly.

Nancy opened the door and looked at him quite calmly. "I wish," she said in that melodious voice he so well remembered, "you hadn't come. I wish . . ."

And then Clay, Jr. stood behind her, his youngish eyes flashing at Drew over his mother's shoulder. "What do you want?"

Drew said thoughtfully, "It's hard to say, Clay. I—"

"If it's no business, Sheriff, we don't want to talk to you. . . I guess you heard my mother."

"Clay!" Nancy's voice was improving. "Mind your manners. As long as Drew is here, as a guest. . ."

"Not in this house. He's no. . ."

"Clay . . . stop it."

"No," Drew sighed. "No, let him go on. What is it, Clay? Get it all out of your system."

"You killed my father. I'm head of the house here, now, and—"

"You're not," said Nancy. "You're sixteen years old, Clay. . . and . . . and Drew was our friend." She waved her hands in a hopeless gesture. "I wish you'd try not to be so dreadfully bitter against him."

Clay stared at his mother, his throat constricting. "But... but he killed Dad, Mother. You... you're not forgetting..."

"NO," NANCY sighed, and her eyes on Drew's warmed a little. "I'm not forgetting... a lot of things. Drew had his duty... don't forget that. He wanted your father to go along with him, without any bloodshed. But... well, they fought, and... and Drew won. And..."

"And shot Dad through the heart, Mother," Clay said coldly. "The best shot in the county. I suppose he had to do that!"

Nancy smiled wanly, "You weren't there, Clay. Please... take my word for it. He did. It wasn't Drew's fault... not really. I've had more time, now, to think about it. I—I want you to be nice to Drew, while he's our guest." She extended her hands toward Drew. "Come in, Drew. It's cold out there."

Drew went in. Clay's face was sullen. He stood hesitating a moment, then suddenly shouldered past Drew and swept outside, scowling. Nancy cried out, "Clay, where are you going?"

"Anywhere..." came Clay's sullen voice. "Anywhere but in the house, Mother. He's your guest... not mine!"

The door slammed. Drew shrugged as he took off his gunbelt and hung it on the peg just inside the door. "Young blood runs hot, Nancy. He'll quiet down. Give him time." He was happy. He knew that the month since the funeral had told its story within her. She no longer despised him.

She said, "That was a fine thing you did for me, Drew. Letting him think it was you who... letting the whole town think you killed poor Clay. But they'll hurt you, Drew. That Bigger George and his..." She shuddered. "I've often thought of telling the truth to them all... but I'm afraid, Drew. It's... well, Clay's such a hot-headed boy, and..."

"I know," Drew said "I know. Don't you think of telling him, Nancy. Let him hate me a while. There are a lot

of people who hate me; I don't care. I'm used to it, sort of. Sometimes... sometimes I think I draw my strength from it." He smiled, happy to be so near her, basking in her warmth, in her enveloping goodness. "Now don't fret yourself, Nancy. Clay's not going to hurt me."

CHAPTER IV

CLAY didn't know where to go, after he slammed so violently out of the house. In all of his sixteen years, he had never been caught up in such a hot rage of hatred and disgust as now gripped him. There was a sharp pain within him when he thought of his mother, being friendly and nice, as only she could, to the man who had killed her husband, just a month ago.

Clay scowled as he walked across the lawn toward the bunkhouse, and felt nausea rise up inside of him. He hated the sheriff. If he'd had his way, inside there, he would have sent Drew Duttley packing out of the house at the point of a gun.

A friend, Mother had called him! Clay scowled again, there in the shadowy blackness, and cursed his own spinelessness, for not taking charge of the situation, and refusing to admit the sheriff.

Halfway to the bunkhouse, he stopped cold. He didn't want to walk inside and let the hands see him in his present mood, he decided. He debated a while, decided the wisest thing for him, right now, was to saddle up and try to ride the hot anger out of his system. He was in a mood to start some serious trouble, and Mother had had enough of that sort of thing, lately.

He took the trail toward Copper City, and loped along dispiritedly, his head hanging. He had gone no more than half a mile from the house, however, when a figure loomed out of the shadows, and a guttural voice hailed him.

"Hey, kid, where y' headin'?"

Clay peered at the moon-washed features and recognized the hawk face of thin Rake Davis, one of Bigger George's two mean-eyed gun

slicks. He had never cottoned up to either of them, and now he shuddered his distaste of Rake Davis.

"Just ridin'," he announced dully.

Rake Davis stared at him. "What's the matter? You look kinda peaked."

"Nothin'."

"Sheriff visitin' out to yore place t'night, is he?" Rake grinned shrewdly. "Reckon this here's the night he said he was gonna."

Clay bit his lip, feeling mild irritation. He would have gone on, but Rake Davis said quickly, "Hell, kid, you can talk t' me, can't you? Reckon I hate Duttley a deal more'n you do!"

"Yeah?" Clay said slowly.

"Sure. Mebbe he kilt your father, but he kilt three o' my best friends. Lengy Tobias, Streck Wendell, and Porthole McGinnis. Shot 'em down without givin' 'em even a chance to. . ."

"Way I heard it, Rake, it was a straight-out gun fight. It was shoot or get shot, both sides, and if the sheriff hadn't of sensed a trap, he'd be sleepin' right now in Boothill. Them three wasn't nothing but hired gunhands of Bigger George's, that he'd imported. . . ." He suddenly realized the implications of what he was saying, realized he was on dangerous footing there with the snake-like Rake Davis, and he hesitated. It struck him as odd, that he had instinctively sided with Drew Duttley, the man he despised and hated.

Rake Davis was chuckling harshly. "Go ahead, kid. You can't hurt my feelings. I ain't got any. You take your pop, though. Ain't no questions about *that*, I don't reckon. Duttley shot him straight through the heart. . . ." he grinned evilly ". . . an' right now, for all we know, he's sittin' in your pop's own easy chair, makin' love t' your mother."

"You're lying!" Clay flared hotly. "Don't say. . ."

"You mean. . . ." Rake Davis stared dumbly at him. "why. . . shucks, kid, I'm right sorry. Y' mean, you didn't know Duttley was sweet on your ma? Tarnation!"

Clay stared miserably at him. "They. . . . they were just friends. All those years. . . they were in

school together. The three. . . Clay, my mother, and Drew. I never thought. . ."

"Well, the milk's spilled now, younker. I—I'm right sorry. But shucks, the whole town's knowed fer years Drew had an eye for yer mother." He smiled crookedly, and his hawk nose crinkled. "Could be, if Drew has his way, you'll wind up havin' the law fer a foster father."

Clay sat there, stunned at the thought. A hot rage burned within him. "Never," he grated. "Never. I'd kill him, before I'd let. . ."

"Well, now," said Rake Davis, "that's more like it, young feller. Always knowed we had somethin' in common."

CLAY looked at him weirdly. "What do you mean?"

"Killin' Drew Duttley'll take some doin'." "T ain't no one-man job, an' that's fer certain. . . But if the two of us was to work on this thing together. . ."

Clay felt a wave of revulsion sweep through him. "No," he said coldly. "If it comes to killing, between me an' him, it'll be all above board. A clean, straight shoot-out. I ain't skulking alongside of no drygulch trail and pot-shooting. . ."

"You're plain dumb, kid. Duttley's got eyes in back of his head. He hears things a mile. He draws like lightning. He'd knock you down so quick, if you was to try drawin' against him. . ."

"There's such a thing," Clay said wearily, "as dying with honor. My dad taught me some things about guns, before Drew killed him. I—"

"You're a fool," said Rake Davis harshly. "You go up against Drew with your precious honor and see what it gets you. A grave, is all; mark my word for it. An' . . . when you're gone, Drew still marries yer mother. You ask me, your attitude's selfish. Main thing's to get vengeance fer your father, an' protect your mother. You ain't protectin' her none, from the grave yard."

"I'm no sneaking, dry-gulching coyote, neither."

Rake Davis scowled. "Jest keep

yer mouth shut then, kid, about what we been sayin'. An' if you was ever t' change yer mind—well, I'm always handy."

"I won't change my mind," Clay said slowly. Then, because the hawk-faced man's face made him shiver with disgust, he turned his mount and rode slowly back toward the ranch.

He met Drew Duttley a quarter mile from the house. The sheriff recognized him even in the bleak shadows of the moon, and called out in friendly greeting,

"Say, hold up a bit, Clay, and let's chin a little. Seems like we oughtta be able to smoke the peace pipe, after so long knowin' each other."

Clay kicked his mount in the ribs and rode past the sheriff without a word, without even looking the tall, hard-eyed lawman in the face.

When he went into the house, a short time later, he blurted out to his mother, "Drew tried to soften me up out on the trail. I won't have him out here again, Mother. He killed Dad, and I—I—" He stared at her shrewdly. "There's been talk around that you and Drew are sort of . . . sweet on each other."

He could see how that jolted his mother. She put down her knitting and glanced up at him, her pretty brow furrowed with deep concern for him.

"Clay . . . you've simply got to try to understand. I know it's hard for you, when you think of your father. I . . . I have something to say that is bound to shock you . . . but you have a right to know it. Only, first—well, I want you to know. . . Drew's a good man."

"Is he?" Clay was sullen.

"He is. He is, Clay. Oh, how can I tell you. He's kind, and considerate, and you'll never realize how patient. All these years. . . and he's willing to wait another whole year, and not mention our—our understanding in public, so folks won't think—" She stopped, watching the shocked expression in the dark depths of Clay's eyes. Clay said coldly,

"Understanding? What sort of—understanding, Mother, could you be having with the man who shot Father?"

She said limply, "He's always loved me, Clay. But he's been so decent. He never said . . . oh, you must try to understand. We—we're going to be married. Now. . . don't take on. It's not for a year, and until then, no one will even know about. . . Clay, where are you going?"

Clay flung his impassioned reply over one rude, stiff young shoulder, as he thrust blindly outside.

"I'm going to find Drew Duttley, Mother. And kill him!"

THOUGH he pushed his horse like a wild man on that trail to Copper City, he did not overtake the tall, hard-faced lawman. Instead, a black figure emerged from the trail-side shadows, as had once before happened that evening, and it was Rake Davis, Bigger George's trigger-quick henchman.

Davis looked haggard, nervous, "Where's Drew Duttley?"

"That's what I want to know," Clay gritted fiercely. "You've been hiding here by the trail, waiting for him?" He said it without rancor, without the open disgust he had showed for the professional killer at their earlier meeting. "And he didn't pass here? I saw him heading town way, right after I left you."

Rake Davis shivered. "He's a wolf, that's what he is. He's got two hundred eyes, and a dozen ears, and he smells danger a mile as the crow flies. I hate him, but I ain't afraid to admit I'm scared of him." He lowered his rasping voice, and whispered, "For all we know, he may be somewhere's around right now, listenin' to ever'thing we been sayin'."

"Nonsense," Clay scoffed. "Any man's human."

"He's had a round dozen agin him ever since he took office. He's kilt every man that raised a finger agin him. Don't tell me, young feller." Rake Davis controlled his nerves a little, said curiously, "Where was you bent, ridin' so hard, Clay?"

"Chasin' Drew. Meanin' to kill him."

Rake Davis licked his lips and said quickly, "What happened?"

"That's my business."

"Why sure, sure," said Rake. "Lis-

ten, it's a big order you're takin' on, Clay. No one man'll swing it, I tell you. Needs teamwork, and even so, it needs stealth, craft. We both want him outta the way, for our own private reasons. Now if we was to work out something together. . . " He paused, looked expectantly at Clay's drawn face.

Clay paused a brief moment, then shrugged, and asked in a flat voice, "How?"

"I—I dunno, jest off hand. No. . . wait a minute—you—you figger he'll be headin' out to the ranch again in the next few days, do you?"

Clay scowled, said non-committally, "He might."

Rake Davis stroked his stubble of beard and finally went on, "Well, a man don't make a social visit without hangin' his gun on the wall peg, I don't reckon. You got a peg in your entry way, do you?"

"Yes."

"Is it out of line with the sittin' room—I mean—where Drew'd be likely to visit an' talk with your mother?"

Clay nodded grimly. "Come to the point, Rake. What's your idea?"

Rake grinned wolfishly. "Jest this. S'pose I was to take the caps out of six .45 ca'tridges, and you was to put 'em in Sheriff's gun, whilst he was occupied makin' talk with your mother. Reckon we'd have 'im then, jest about helpless, when he come ridin' towards town."

"You—you'd just shoot him down—in cold blood?"

"Kid, it's like I told you. It's him or you. You gotta be tough in your soul, or you'll be pushin' up daisies. Drew's that way hisself. He don't ask fer no quarter, nor give none. Reckon your pa'd tell you, if he could come back from the grave an' talk to you. Drew shot him down in cold blood, right through the heart—"

"Stop it," Clay said. He was mixed up inside, badly. Always it came back to that, when he felt himself waver away from his own strict standards of decent behavior. Drew *had* killed his father, and was sparking his mother, but even such consuming hatred as he carried within his slight body

could not wholly still the proddings of conscience, of what he had learned about a man's honor.

"I won't shoot him that way," he said wildly. "I—I couldn't."

"You don't have to," said the crafty Rake. "I'll do the shootin'. All you gotta do is plant them dud ca'tridges in his sixgun. Wave a lantern in front of an upstairs window of the house, so I'll know it's done—and I'll handle Duttley from then on." He cackled harshly. "Whatta you say, kid? Will you side me that much—agin the man that done in your father?"

Clay took a long time replying. "Yes," he said dully. "Yes. You can look for that lantern the next time the sheriff comes out to visit my mother!"

"Fine, kid. Fine," said Rake Davis, and his rail-thin snake's body bristled with active pleasure in this moment. "We've got him," he cackled, and rubbed his thin hands. "He won't get away this time!"

Clay nodded grimly and turned his horse homeward. He rode limply, wearily, lost in the blank mood the events of the evening had created within him. Somewhere in the shadows alongside of the trail, a night-prowling snake shook its rattles, and slid oilily away from him. He shuddered, thinking of Rake Davis, who was himself so much like a rattle-snake, who believed that the only way to get rid of Drew Duttley was to disarm the sheriff, and then to strike him down without warning.

"Fine company I'm keeping," Clay muttered angrily. Then he thought of his dead father, and of his mother's acceptance of Drew Duttley's proposal of marriage, and iron came in him. He lost all regrets for this thing he was doing.

CHAPTER V

DREW DUTTLEY came again three nights later. Clay saw the tall figure on the magnificent, long-striding black, coming in a rising dust cloud a half mile distant. He was watching from his bedroom window. He went downstairs at once, and went out through the back

door. When his mother asked what had gotten into him, he said shortly, "Drew Duttley's coming. I don't mean to stay in the house. . . not while he's here!"

His mother said patiently, hopefully, "Clay . . . I wish. . ."

"It's no use, Mother," Clay said, and the door slammed behind him.

He whittled out behind the corral for an hour, till the night turned real black, then he crept stealthily around toward the front of the house, where he knew he could slide into the tiny foyer, do what he had to do to Drew's gun, and get away without fear of detection.

He had the six shells in his pocket—he had got them from Rake Davis in town, when he'd gone in with the buckboard for supplies yesterday—and he knew that the time had come, once and for all, to examine his conscience. He had sworn to kill the man who had murdered his father. And now it had come, he thought grimly.

He pried the front door open slowly, cautiously. He slipped inside, hearing a low murmur of voices from the big sitting room. He took down the sheriff's gun, slid the loading gate open, and substituted the six dud cartridges for Drew Duttley's live shells in a matter of seconds.

Then, panting as if he'd just run a race, he crept stealthily outside into the night's brooding blackness.

It's done, then, he thought. Nothing to do now but get word to Rake, and I wash my hands of it!

He skirted the house, went in the back door, and up the back steps to his bed room on the top floor. The lantern was there. He struck a match to the wick, watched the flame flare up firmly, then waved it briskly in front of the window. So now Rake knew. Tonight was the night, the finish for Drew Duttley. When Drew left the house for the ride back to town, Clay would wave the lantern once more, so Rake would know that the sheriff was coming, so Rake could be ready and waiting to kill him.

As Rake had said, when Clay met him in town, the thing was foolproof. This way, there was no hope at all for Drew Duttley.

Sitting on the hard bed in his blacked-out room, Clay felt a brief nudge of satisfaction at the thought, but he could not bring himself to smile at the prospect. He was not that callous.

He waited a solid three hours, there in the darkness, before he heard the sounds downstairs which told him that Drew was about to make his departure. Clay played it safe, and waited until he heard the door closing behind the lawman before he relighted the lamp and again waved it briskly in front of the window. In his mind's eye, he could see snake-like Rake Davis crouched in some thicket, high in the hills, smiling toothily as he read the signal.

IT WAS all up, now, Clay thought weirdly, for Sheriff Drew Duttley. Then he felt a small fist of iron grasp his elbow, vise-like, and his mother's voice said in stern, half-panic,

"What are you doing?"

Clay said sickly, "It's my business, Mother—"

"You were signalling," her tense voice accused him. "Clay . . . you. . . if this is some plan to . . . hurt Drew Duttley . . . I'll . . . but it *must* be. It has to be! Clay . . . why?" Her voice was distraught, beaten. "Clay . . . why must you hate him so fiercely?"

"He killed Father! He—"

"He didn't! Some one is waiting out there to . . . to get him. Isn't that it? Isn't that why you signalled with this?" She waved the lamp wildly, her face twisted with strain and confusion. "Clay. . . you must warn him. Quickly. Before it's too late!"

"B-but . . . what do you mean—he didn't kill Father?"

His mother looked straight in his eyes, and said dully, "I did, Clay." And then, as Clay stood in shocked, benumbed silence, she explained the whole thing, finishing hysterically, "Drew was afraid you'd hate me. That was why he took the blame, that awful day. That's why he's been crucified in town. . . all for our sake. Oh, Clay, if anything happens to him tonight. . . and . . . it's our fault. . ."

Clay said weirdly, "I've been a fool

... a fool! I—I—I've got to get going. I—I'm sorry, Mother. I didn't know ... or I'd never have acted so ..."

"Run, Clay. Run! Try to catch him!"

But it takes time to saddle and ride, even at sixteen, when the muscles are supple, the reflexes swift. It was fully ten minutes before the conscience-struck youngster tore like a madman out the ranch lane toward the trail to Copper City.

He felt unclean, dirty with this thing he had done to Drew Duttley. Why had they deceived him, refused to trust him with the truth of his dad's killing? He could have stood that better. Was he such a child, that they had had to spare him the facts of the matter? And now, if he failed to catch up with Drew, before hawk-like, venomous Rake Davis got to him, it would lie like a canker within him forever.

He would never be quite the same, toward his mother. Or she toward him. He spurred his horse, and leaned down over the saddle horn, watching the landscape slide past him with frustrated impatience.

The sudden staccato sound of a pistol shot slapped at his ear drums. He held his breath, listening for further sound to come to him, riding the breeze, but he could hear nothing. He thought fiercely, wildly, "*That was Rake. He's shot, just once, and he's nailed Drew. He's got him. And it's all my fault.*"

In his mind's eye he envisioned the scene. Drew rising along with no suspicion of trouble, Rake cowering alongside of the trail, somewhere in the bushes, aiming a rifle. The one single, death-dealing explosion, and Drew buckling, careening limply out of the saddle.

The thought had Clay almost crying with remorse, and he spurred his horse harder. If he had thought so much of his honor, he should have stood firmly against temptation. He had killed Drew Duttley, he thought. And yet ... that gun shot had sounded strangely like sixgun fire. Could it be that the crafty Rake would try to kill even an unarmed, unsuspecting Drew Duttley with a six, when he

could just as well use the safer, surer rifle? ...

It made Clay wonder, and still he rode like a wild man, determined to know, to take any chance that might still save the lawman who had so staunchly befriended his father and mother.

He came, finally, to the top of a high rise, down which the trail dipped gracefully into a deep, half-mile-wide valley. Here the moon had ready access through a wide fissure in the higher ranges of the mountain, and it lit the whole scene in a murky light, as if this were a gigantic stage of nature's devising.

CLAY caught his breath as he topped the rise and looked down the twisting trail, for in that pale yellow light he could see a lone rider loping toward town. The man was at the other end of the valley, and even at such a distance, Clay recognized the long, ground-eating gait of the magnificent Smoky. It was Drew Duttley! That shot Clay had heard had not been the murder shot at all, then!

Drew was still safe. And if Clay could reach him, hail him in time. . . He cupped his hands, but some sudden tenseness about that figure so far below him caused him to stiffen in panic.

He saw Drew suddenly leap from the black and stand behind the horse, facing the woods which rimmed the opposite side of the saucer-like valley. The tall sheriff had a hand near his gunbelt, and stood in an attitude such as a deer might stride, when it feels itself hunted, when it first smells danger.

Drew's bull-like voice suddenly bellowed, "I smell bushwhackers. Come out, you yellow coyotes! Come out an' fight like men, if there's that much guts to you."

His voice carried bell-like, on wafted echoes, back to where Clay stood transfixed, frozen with panic. There was never, Clay thought, another fighting man of such gigantic stature as Sheriff Drew Duttley. Drew's very attitude mirrored the challenge his bull-like voice had so thunder-

ously bellowed. He was not afraid, plainly. Fear was not in him. Rather, he seemed to enjoy the situation.

He had smelled trouble again, before it quite reached him. He sensed the impending struggle for survival, and he seemed to savor the moment.

"Come out!" he bellowed again, and his great fierce laugh floated back toward where Clay was standing. "Come out, you skulking sidewinders. I smell skunk, in them bushes." His great arm waved at a thick blob of brush wood that bordered the valley. Clay looked, and gasped, watching three men suddenly take form from that thicket, and walk down toward Drew Duttley on stiff legs, their hands hooked in their gunbelts.

One walked well to the front, with unmistakable swagger. That was Bigger George, Clay thought weirdly. And then he saw the rag-lipped Jordan and then he saw the rag-lipped Jor-yellow devils! He swore. One had not been enough then, against a disarmed Drew Duttley. Rake took no chances. Or perhaps Bigger George had wanted the personal satisfaction of killing the sheriff.

Clay didn't hesitate. He hitched up his gunbelt, slid down off his horse, and ran awkwardly down toward the quartet below, keeping as well as he could to the shadows.

He saw Drew standing statue-like behind the big black, awaiting the closer approach of that murderous trio, then he heard Bigger George's throaty rumble pierce the silence.

"You want a showdown, Sheriff? Step out from in back of that hoss, an' you'll sure enough get it."

Drew Duttley laughed shortly. "Got brave sorta sudden-like, didn't you, Bigger? You musta been samplin' some of your own rotten red-eye." He laughed on a hard inflection again. "Shore I'll give you a showdown," he said, and stepped out in the clear, not twenty short paces from where the three stood.

He did not face them. He had a dark shadow behind him, where the moon glow failed to reach that side of the valley. Even so, he made a fine, brave target. Clay gave off all

attempts at stealth in his swift approach to them, then. He cried out hoarsely, "Back, Drew. Your gun's—"

Bigger George cursed, swinging to face him. Rag Jordan's hand slammed to his hip, came up belching orange flame in Clay's direction. Clay felt hot lead whistle past his head, fanning his cheek, and went down prone.

He punched out a shot at Jordan, but a strange thing happened. Jordan fell back in a crashing dive to the ground even before Clay triggered at the elusive target.

Clay stared, gasping, at the picture of Sheriff Drew Duttley, standing there alongside of his horse, throwing lead death and destruction out at the three, fast as squirting water out of a hose.

ALREADY the sheriff's first shot had accounted for Jordan. Bigger George swore with rage and panic, stared awe-struck at the tall, enraged Drew Duttley, at the orange blasts that emanated from the sheriff's sixgun. He shot swiftly, in desperate haste, and Drew stumbled backward, hit hard.

Clay was too stunned to be of much use. He drew a careful bead on Bigger George, but his hand shook so as he triggered that he missed the man by a mile.

He heard Drew grunt with pain, and sit down heavily. Then Drew was lifting his gun again, for a quick shot, unaimed, but deadly accurate. Rake Davis groaned and went down as if a rolling log had knocked his feet out from beneath him.

Bigger George swore, "Damn you, Drew. Damn you!" and shot again. Drew's left arm was a rag, hanging limp, but his right hand could still hold that smoking sixgun. He aimed carefully, triggered.

Bigger George stood like a stone, a wondering expression on his florid, buck-toothed face. He dropped his gun, clapped both fat hands to his belly, and staggered forward, bent double, groaning.

He pitched on his face and lay, twitching with pain, not five yards from where Drew Duttley sat, hold-

ing a a smoking sixgun limply in one hand. Drew looked down at the fallen mine owner without emotion.

"You'll live," he said shrewdly, "mebbe an hour, Bigger. Pervidin' you're real lucky. It's a fine time for talkin', if you was minded that way."

Clay went forward, "Drew, if there's anything I could do. . . to— to help—"

Drew waved him weakly to silence. He addressed the fallen mine owner, "You won't survive that belly shot, Bigger. You know it. If there's anything on your conscience, you'd better quick spill it."

Bigger George rumbled fiercely, "I'm through talkin', Sheriff. It's a mite too late. . . ." He groaned. "Tell you one thing: you can quit lookin' for Clay's sidekicks on that stage hold-up party. You just killed both of 'em."

Clay gasped along with the sheriff. Drew said, "Rake and Rags! Then . . ."

Bigger George laughed with mirthless distaste. "I stole my own strong-box, Sheriff. Hired Clay for two hundred dollars, to help out on that one job, an' the dang fool had to botch it. . . let old Dan Tobbey reco'nize him. But I collected my insurance money on it . . . made a tidy profit." His throaty voice turned hard as stone, "I'd've made more, if I'd got rid of you, Duttley."

Drew sighed wearily and turned his attention away from the dying mine owner. He looked up wanly toward Clay. "Better go back to the ranch, Clay, an' fetch the buckboard. I don't figger to die, right off—" he grinned feebly "—but you'll have three corpses to tote in, I reckon." He smiled with his eyes. "Thanks for tryin' to warn me. And—don't think hard of your dad. He was hard up for money, and he was thinking of your mother and you, mostly, or he'd never have throwed in with this buck-toothed jigger."

"I—I won't think hard of him," Clay gulped. "Or—or of you, either."

Drew was surprised. "Well, now," he said, "that's some gratifyin'. I'm

right glad, Clay . . . it'll please your mother."

Clay turned to go, then said, hesitating, "Drew. . . your gun. . ."

The sheriff's eyes twinkled "Funny, about that. Come a rattlesnake across my trail, when I'd rode out from the ranch a good piece. I took a pot shot at it, an' the dang gun misfired. Wasn't one good shell in it. I figger either somebody tampered with my gun up in town. . . or else them shells just got wet, or was too old to be fired. I loaded up fresh from my belt, kilt the critter, and come along trail till I smelt these human rattlers up there in the bushes."

"Y-you sure gave 'em what for," Clay said with unconcealed admiration.

"T wa'n't nothin'," said Drew Duttley. "I figger they must've put them dud shells in my gun back in town, or they wouldn't never have taken the challenge. They needed some killin'. This town'll be decent, now the scum's off it."

Clay wondered uneasily how strong, exactly, was the sheriff's hunch as to how those duds had gotten into his gun. Did the sheriff suspect the truth? It would be like the big, considerate lawman, to spare Clay's feelings. Clay suddenly knew what a fine thing it would be, to have such a man for a father. He said suddenly, on impulse,

"Drew. . . why wait—to get married? I mean—if you and mother are sure, there's no sense to. . ."

Drew chuckled. "Told you, did she?" And when Clay soberly nodded, "Well, son, I'm all for not waiting . . . an' since you're of the same mind, there ain't but one thing can stop us." He laughed again. "And that's your mother." He looked up slyly. "You're the man of the house. Why don't you talk to her?"

"I will," Clay said soberly, "I will," and turned toward the ranch trail, a wide grin creasing his youngish features.

(THE END)

NESTER

BY *Wilbur S. Peacock*



"My grandfather settled this land, Nester. It was open land and I aim to see it stays that way. Your kind comes in and tears up the land; others follow. Then before you know it, there isn't any land fit for grazing left. I've seen it happen before, Nester, and it ain't going to happen to me!"



I WAS scared. I could see dad's face, and it wasn't smiling the way it usually did, with the little white wrinkles around his eyes. Even his mustache seemed to bristle more than ever; and he swung his eyes back

and forth, without moving his head, as we rode into town.

It was early morning, but already the town was awake. Old man Lunt was sweeping the boardwalk in front of the General Store, and further along, the smithy pounded a red-hot wheel rim with great sweeping blows. The Sheriff was outside the Palace Hotel, picking his teeth with the gold toothpick which he carried on his watch chain, and he watched us pass with his eyes bright and shiny like black coat buttons.

"There's the Sheriff, dad," I said. "Maybe he can do something?"

Dad didn't answer, and his eyes went past the Sheriff without seeing him. I wished then that dad had carried his gun or had let me bring the rifle for the empty saddle boot beneath my right leg. If Kane felt like doing it, his men could cut us down before we had a chance to talk; and he'd make it look like self defense, like he'd done with others. And we couldn't count much on the Sheriff; he was a fence-straddler, the way I had it figured.

We looked pretty poor, I guess. But our horses were all right. "A ten dollar horse and a hundred dollar saddle is foolish, Jimmy," he had told me. "Get your fripperies, after you get the best horse you can afford."

So our horses were just about the best in the country. Morgans, they were, and sleek with good feeding and grooming. They walked proudly; and riding them was fun and not a chore. Mine was black, with a blaze face, and dad's was grey, with dark stockings. They trusted us, and we used soft bits, they were so gentle.

But they looked better than us, I guess. My levis were cut-down ones of dad's, and his were faded and bleached from washing and wear. Mom was like that; she didn't like dirt, even on a farm, and every Saturday, she set the kettle on the outdoor trestle and boiled the wash. My shirt, though, was my own, and just like dad's, big red and black checks.

Old man Lunt stopped his sweeping and watched us come even with his store. His eyes were shiny mirrors, without like or dislike in them; they just watched. Dad's credit wasn't any good in his store, of course, no nester's was, but since dad didn't believe in credit, it didn't matter.

"Seen Kane, Mr. Lunt?" dad asked, reining in his grey.

Lunt spat tobacco juice at the street, without answering. I knew then he had made his decision. Dad's hands tightened on the reins, and then he tipped his hat, and we went on down the street.

I hated Old Man Lunt then. I hadn't thought much about him one way or the other before; but now, knowing he had thrown in with the cattlemen,

I could feel anger stirring hotly in my heart.

Dad sensed my thoughts, like he always did; and he reached over and touched me on the arm.

"Don't blame him, Jimmy," he said. "He's only doing what he thinks is right."

"What right's he got to be against us?" I asked angrily. "We never hurt him any."

Dad shrugged. We were almost to the saloon now, where Kane's Cattlemen's Association held their meetings; and we saw Brickle, Kane's right-hand man, slip back through the swinging doors.

"Now, Jimmy," dad said, "don't go shooting off your mouth. I'll do the talking." His mouth was thin and strong then. "There may be trouble, but I don't think so. Anyway, keep your tongue hitched."

"Yes, sir," I said, but I didn't like it.

THERE wasn't any movement at all in the town then, just a sleepy watchfulness which you could feel but not see. A windmill creaked lazily, and chickens clucked contentedly where they scratched near the rear of the saloon's stable. Half a dozen horses were hitched at a street rack, and at the far end of the street a wagon from the Lazy T was coming in for supplies.

Dad swung his grey in toward the rack, and dismounted. I sat for a minute, seeing the town and remembering how big it had looked a year before when first we had arrived. Now, with its few stores and ten or twelve houses, it looked ugly and dead.

"Come on, Jimmy," dad said, and I slid from the saddle.

We went up the step to the walk and into the saloon. Carter, the saloonkeeper, was behind the bar, and Kane was having a morning drink, flanked by Brickle and another man. They were watching the door, and I could see Brickle's hands close to his guns. He was probably the most dangerous man in there at the moment, and I clenched my fist about the chunk of rock in my pocket.

"Good morning," dad said quietly and faced the group.

"Outside, mister," Carter said grimly. "There's no room for nesters here."

Dad ignored the bartender. He studied Kane quietly for a moment, and slowly a flush built in the ranger's face.

"I wanted to talk to you, Mister Kane," dad said evenly. "I've got some papers you ought to see."

Temball Kane said nothing, and he twisted the whiskey glass idly in his fingers. He was old, and incredibly big. His hair was snow white and thick, and the morning stubble on his cheeks looked like flour. A full head taller than dad, and fifty pounds heavier, his strength was obvious and brutal.

"You've had your say before, Miller," he said, his voice deep and rumbling. "I'm not interested."

"I think you are." I saw the first lines of anger come about dad's eyes. "These are government papers, showing the land is mine."

Brickle stepped forward, bulky and bitter. He spat tobacco juice at dad's boot, and then prodded dad's chest with a long finger.

"Mister," he said flatly, "get out of the country. This is open range, and there ain't going to be no fences nowheres."

I was proud of dad then, and scared, too. He reached up and pushed Brickle's hand away, and his voice was still even and unhurried.

"You beefed two of my cows last night, Brickle," he said. "You owe me forty dollars."

Brickle started to laugh, and then the laughter faded before dad's gaze, and anger stirred hungrily in his face.

"You're a liar," he said thinly.

There was no sound then for a moment. I watched dad's hands, ready to help him the minute he threw the first punch. His knuckles went white; and then the fingers uncurled.

"Mister Kane," dad said, "I'm appealing to you. I've caused no trouble, and I've hurt nobody; the range is big, why can't we live in peace?"

Temball Kane set the glass on the bar. His eyes were unfriendly. "My

grandpa settled this land," he said. "It was open land. I aim to see it stays that way."

"That your final word?"

"That's it," Kane answered. "I've seen your kind before. You come in and tear up the land, others follow; and before you know it, there isn't any land fit for grazing left. Move on while you're still healthy."

He turned away, his broad back solid and indomitable. Carter refilled his glass, and the chatter of bottle on glass was the only sound. Dad hesitated for a moment and then swung toward the door.

"Come on, Jimmy," he said quietly.

WE WENT from the saloon, pushed by the harsh noise of Brickle's laughter, and climbed into our saddles. I could feel myself shaking, I was so mad; and I could see the bleakness in dad's eyes.

Dad turned the grey, and I followed. The few people on the street stood and watched us pass, and there was wary unfriendliness in their eyes. Old man Lunt leaned on his broom, and I felt like chucking my rock at him.

We went out of town, going to the west, and followed the wagon road for a couple of miles before cutting to our left toward our farm. Quail ran from cover and rocketed into space with a burst of sound like gunshots. A rabbit cocked its ears warily, and then dropped out of sight in the grass.

The Morgans stepped lightly; and if it hadn't been for my thoughts I could have enjoyed riding. Dad was silent, and I felt sorry for him. Hearing him and Mom talk in the past year had made me realize just how much the farm meant to them. Missouri seemed a long way off now, and I had trouble remembering what our old place had been like. It seemed like we'd lived here always.

The mountains, purple and black and white, seemed so close I could almost touch them, and the earth was rich and brown and smelled clean and fruity when a plow turned it in even rows. This was farming land, fed by the river, and the wheat and corn

grew like it was being pushed upward by some giant in the ground.

We topped a ridge and could see the farm below. The house wasn't much, three rooms, and made of sodded cottonwood poles. But dad had said he'd build a better house, once the farm really got to going.

I could see Dottie playing with her doll beneath the big tree, and Mom came out and waved. The six cows we had left were out behind the lean-to barn, and Duke, my big dog, came racing to meet us, barking his fool head off as usual.

We kicked the Morgans into a slow lope, following the road out around the edge of the cornfield. It was peaceful here; and it was hard to believe that only minutes before, men had told us in subtle words that we could expect trouble.

We unsaddled and turned the horses loose in the pasture, and carried our saddles up to the house. Dottie pulled at dad's leg, and he caught her up with a swoop of motion which brought delighted squeals from her. She was like mom, dainty and golden-haired and always laughing.

"Been a good girl?" dad asked.

"Dood," Dottie said. She was just learning to talk and sounded funny when she said the few words she knew.

"Fine," dad said, and put her down. She went back to where she had dropped her doll.

I roughed Duke's ears, listening to dad and Mom. She was watching his face, and I saw her hand come to her throat.

"He wouldn't listen?" she asked.

"No!" dad answered. He saw I was listening, and jerked his chin. "Go play with Dottie," he said to me. "Your Mom and I've got some talking to do."

I went reluctantly, wanting to listen. Mom and dad went into the house; and after a bit, he came out with a pail for water.

"Dinner," Mom called. "Wash up and come on."

The dinner was good, like it always was, but only Dottie did much talking. She was practicing words again.

When we were almost through, dad said, "Don't do any riding or hunting for a while, Jimmy; stay close to the house."

"All right," I said. I knew he and Mom were scared that Kane or Brickie, or some of their men, might take a shot at me.

NOTHING happened, though, that week. Dad and I took turns walking the plow; and when he had time, dad used a cross-cut to shape some boards for the new house we were going to have. The boards were piling at the edge of the lot, and nights, he and mom looked over the plans she had drawn. The house sounded swell, with four rooms, and a hand pump in the kitchen for water, and a barrel stove which would come from Kansas City by train and freight line. There would even be glass in two of the rooms, the other windows being oiled gut and swinging shutters.

Dottie was under foot all the time, practicing her talking and playing 'piggyback'. I took her down to the river, where the white sand was like snow, and showed her how I could swim, only she got scared, and I had to come out and show her I wasn't hurt.

I made her a willow whistle, and even took her riding on my horse in front of me. With her long yellow hair tickling my nose and her laughing giggles coming back, it was fun.

The only thing I didn't like was school. There wasn't any place to go, but Mom was set that I could read and cipher like her and dad, so she made me study each morning for two hours over the books she'd brought from Missouri. I was getting pretty good, too; I could read and write, and if the problems weren't too big, I could figure out numbers pretty easy.

Mom was like that. She was a Stevens, and I guess they were always kind of high-nosed. She'd even taught school before marrying dad, and she 'lowed as how her children weren't going to be savages just because we were so far from the big towns. So I studied like she wanted;

and she made the lessons kind of fun, so I didn't mind.

Old Eagle Claw and some of his bucks came by once. They weren't much like pictures showed them to be. The only feathers they wore were single ones in their hair, and they stank of dirt and sweat. But they didn't cause no trouble; and when Mom fed them flapjacks and sorghum, they rubbed their bellies and grinned just like they were kids. Eagle Claw gave me a tommyhawk and gave Dottie a buckskin doll when they left, and they waved at Mom and dad when they rode off up the valley.

"They're good people," Mom said. "It's too bad a lot of selfish persons treat them like animals."

"I suppose so," dad agreed, and went back to whipsawing lumber for the house.

SHERIFF GRATTON rode in that night. He came in after supper time and didn't get off his horse. His face was redder than usual, and his eyes were ugly with his feelings. "I got a disposess notice, Miller," he said. "You're to get out of here within twenty-four hours."

"Disposess?" Dad stood right up to him. "I own this land; you nor nobody else can run me off this property."

The Sheriff chewed his quid of tobacco, looking around the neat yard. He was Kane's man, of course, taking his orders.

"Seems there was a mistake at the agent's office," he said. "Your property is over that away."

He pointed to the southwest, where only the scrub land was. I could see quick knowledge come to dad's face.

"Get out," dad said. "Tell Kane I've got Washington papers which say I own this land. If he wants to buck the government, then he's just courting trouble."

The Sheriff spat. "You don't understand," he said ominously. "Kane's the government around these parts."

He wheeled his black and rode out of the yard. We watched him go, until he was just a black speck on the

horizon. Then he was vanished, and we were alone on our farm again.

"That was a warning," Mom said. "What do we do, Walter?"

Dad shook his head. "I don't know," he admitted. "But there's no use worrying."

He went back to cutting wood, but now he had his rifle with him. Mom kept Dottie with her, and I brought in the cows for the night milking. We ate supper and sat around, while Mom read from the Bible, and then popped some of the corn dad had saved from last year. With melted butter and salt, it was plenty good.

About nine o'clock we went to bed. I could hear Mom and dad talking softly from their room, and I wondered what they were saying. Then I must have gone to sleep, for the next thing I knew the chickens were raising a racket out in the yard.

"Coyote," I heard dad say, and then he was making sounds, pulling on his boots and catching up the rifle.

He went outside, and a gun went off, and then another; and then I could hear the voices of men.

"Come on out, Missus Miller, and bring the kids," Brickie's voice yelled. "We've got your husband, and we don't want to hurt nobody more'n we have to."

Mom came in, carrying a lamp, and I could see how white her face was. She bundled Dottie in a blanket, and I walked beside her, barefoot and wearing my levis which I'd pulled on. We got outside, and dad was being held by two men, while the rest of them were still on their horses.

Mom went straight to dad, but the two men wouldn't let her get close. I was going to turn back and get dad's revolver, but Brickie caught my arm and threw me to the ground.

"Stay there, kid," he snapped.

I got to my feet, but I didn't try to get back into the house again. I looked at the horsemen, and despite the masks, I recognized everybody there. Kane, and Williams, and Potter, and a dozen others. They were all armed; and I could feel the fear congealing about me like ice.

"You can't do this, Kane," dad said,

and I saw then the bloody streak on his face where a fist had cut.

"You had your warning, nester," Kane said, and the handkerchief mask bellied about his face where his breath blew. "We don't want you or your kind around here."

Mom didn't say anything, yet I could see that there was no fear in her face. I was glad of that, and I stilled the trembling of my hands by sticking them in my pockets.

"What do you aim to do?" dad asked.

Brickle grinned. "What do you figure?" he answered, and jerked his hand. "Burn it down boys."

Mom cried out, and Brickle caught her so that she was held still. Dad went crazy for the minute, fighting and bucking; but he didn't have a chance against the two men holding him.

Three men slipped from their horses and went into the house. I heard the lamp break, and then flame burst from one window, and seconds later, the men came out, fire pushing at them. The hiss and crackle of the flames was harsh in the night.

I was crying, not moving, for this was my home being destroyed; and Dottie was awake now, whimpering, not knowing what was going on. I could see Old man Lunt at the back of the crowd, and beside him was the Sheriff. They watched, not moving, and I wished then I was a man so I could kill them.

THEN fire was poking through the roof, and all of us had to move back from the heat. Cottonwood burned fast, and it seemed only a second until the roof had collapsed. When it was absolutely certain that nothing could escape, Brickle looked up at Kane.

"How about the stock?" he said. "Want me to shoot it?"

I threw myself at him, pummeling with both hands, but he slapped me aside, and I lay dazed for a moment. "I'll kill you for that, Brickle," dad said evenly, but rage was in every line of his body.

Brickle laughed, and leaned into a blow. Dad grunted, and sagged in his

captors' grip. Then, methodically, relishing every second of it, Brickle beat dad into unconsciousness. He collapsed at last, and the men let him fall to the ground. Brickle stepped back, breathing hard, looking to Kane for approval.

Mom cried out softly, and came forward to bend over dad. Dottie was crying, and I took her in my arms to sooth her. Behind us, the flames didn't leap so high, burning themselves out. Dad began to stir, and in a moment sat up, supported by Mom's arms.

He was physically whipped, his face cut, one eye swelled shut, but he pushed to his feet, swaying, and faced the nightriders.

"You filthy bunch of cowards," he said. "You dirty stinking cowards."

Brickle started forward, and dad faced him; and for some reason Brickle hesitated. Dad was a head shorter than he, yet he seemed the larger. Dad was battered and shaky, yet he was the stronger of the two. And his voice went on, strong and impassioned.

"You ride in a mob because you're afraid," he said. "Twenty men afraid of a man and a woman and two children."

"Shut up!" Kane snarled.

"Shut me up," dad challenged. "Shut me up like you did the family on the South Fork, or the family over by the Branch. Use your guns, why don't you?"

"Maybe we will," Brickle said, and his hands began to uncurl from fists.

"We're the best thing that ever happened to you, Kane," dad said, and his tone softened. "You're big and the land is big; but you're not the Almighty. You've ruled here so long, you think nobody else has any rights. This is your own little bit of the Universe, and nobody can set a foot on it. Well, you're wrong."

"Back East, there are thousands who will come some day. They have the right, legal and moral. They'll bring schools and churches and civilization out here, and land-hungry men like you will have to go. The courts, not guns, will be the law,

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The clerk had recognized
Luke — called out his
name.

The Gravemaker

By DAN KIRBY

Luke Crowder hadn't really wanted to kill the store-man, and he didn't relish killing old Hodge now. But it had to be done, or he'd stretch rope for sure!

LUKE CROWDER didn't want to kill old Hodge Aikens. Not that Luke had any love in his heart for the old man. It was just that old Hodge, even with sixty winters behind him, was still doing most of the work on the quarter-section homestead, and Luke knew that with Hodge gone life would be a little harder. But Luke figured he had to kill him or stretch a hangrope himself, and to Luke's way of thinking that didn't leave him much choice.

That was why Luke was chopping the stove wood this morning. Hodge usually took care of that chore, but Luke had slipped out early and split up enough wood to cook a meal. A

crafty smile spread over Luke's weasel face as he picked up the armbad of jack oak. Hodge didn't know it, but he was about to build his last fire in the old cast-iron stove.

Hodge was up when Luke got back to the cabin. The grizzled oldster smiled at Luke when he saw the stack of firewood he was carrying. "Shore glad yuh cut that wood, son," he said. "I got a touch of rheumatism in that bad shoulder again. Don't know what I'd do if I didn't have yuh here to see after me."

Luke smiled thinly and stacked the wood in front of the big stove. It made him sick the way the old man always carried on over him when he

turned a hand around the place. Always calling him "son" and making out that Luke was taking care of him. Maybe it was because Hodge wanted to believe it that he kept talking that way.

Luke shrugged. He didn't know. All he knew was that old Hodge had taken him in when his real pa had been killed in a gun-battle with a deputy sheriff. That had been nearly twenty years ago and Luke had stuck around ever since because old Hodge gave him money and he didn't have to work much.

Luke sat down heavily on the edge of the bunk. He pulled the makings from his shirt pocket and twisted a smoke, lighted it, and gazed idly at the blue cloud drifting toward the ceiling. "I cut the wood," he said shortly. "Reckon you can rustle us up some grub."

The old man nodded and pulled on his boots. "Shore, Luke," he smiled. "Reckon that wood choppin' did whet up yore appetite." He stirred around the table and commenced mixing up flapjack batter.

Luke snorted disgustedly when the oldster stopped beating the thick batter a moment to nurse his stiff shoulder. It was just as well that he was figuring on killing the old man. Hodge wasn't going to be good for much any more with old age creeping up on him like it was.

LUKE flipped away his cigarette and walked around the room. It wasn't that he was hungry. He couldn't eat a bite. Time was dragging now and it was frazzling his nerves. He wanted to get the killing over with. He stared out the window toward the low hills in the north. Sheriff Sam Murphy would be riding over those hills any time now. He had to get Hodge out of the way before the sheriff came.

Old Hodge sat down the flapjack batter and knelt beside the stove. He opened the grate door and raked out dead embers of the evening fire. "These past two nights been freezin' cold," he grunted, "and it looks like a real norther blowin' in this mornin'. I reckon I won't get to blast them

stumps outta the hay field like I'd figured on doin' today."

Luke watched the old man through veiled lids, a catlike expression in his pale eyes. "No," he said softly. "No, I reckon yuh won't make it today, Hodge." A heady, exhilarating feeling flowed through Luke's big body as he stood there staring at old Hodge's back. It was different from last night when he'd killed the fat storekeeper, Chet Long. He had been afraid then.

Luke hadn't intended to kill the storekeeper; he'd just wanted to rob the store. He'd pried open a window and slipped into the back end of the store and was looking around for the strong box where Long kept his money. He'd seen Long lock up and walk off just thirty minutes before.

But before Luke could locate the box Long had come back for something and Luke couldn't get out fast enough. There had been a fight and Luke had killed the man, killed him quick and neat with his Staghorn pocket knife. But not before Long had recognized him and shouted his name.

Luke was just slipping out the back door into the darkness when he saw old Hodge coming down the alley. He knew it was Hodge by the stiff-jointed gait of the man. He and Hodge had ridden into Iron Post together that evening to take on supplies. There was no moon and Hodge's eyes weren't as sharp as a squirrel hunter's any more, but Hodge could hear. Hodge could hear like a blacktail deer. Luke knew that Hodge must have heard Chet Long call out his name. Hodge would have thought nothing about it right then, but later, when he heard that Chet Long was murdered about the time he and Luke were in town he'd remember hearing Long call out. That was why Luke was going to kill Hodge before the oldster heard of Long's death.

Luke knew that Hodge would tell the sheriff. Hodge had always told him he'd back him to the limit as long as he rode straight, but if he ever sold his saddle to the devil like his pa had done, Hodge would turn against him sure. But Hodge

wouldn't know about Chet Long's murder until the sheriff came and when that happened Hodge would be dead, too.

"Yuh best get yore fire started," Luke grunted. "I'll go out and feed the horses while yuh cook the grub."

THE old man nodded and commenced stacking the firewood inside the stove. Luke didn't breathe while Hodge was fussing with the wood. He was afraid that the oldster might see that stick of wood with the little piece of metal protruding from one end.

The idea had come to Luke last night. He had been running the thing over in his mind, wondering how he was going to shut old Hodge up without running afoul of Sheriff Sam Murphy. Then he remembered the dynamite Hodge had bought last night to blast stumps out of the hay field. It came to him then and he couldn't sleep, waiting for dawn to break so he could get to the woodpile.

He had hacked out a groove down the length of the wood and laid a stick of dynamite inside of it, so that the percussion cap barely cleared the stick. Then he'd patched up the wood with a filler made of wood shavings and blackstrap molasses.

It was a good idea, Luke figured. The heat would explode the percussion cap and the cap would set off the dynamite. The sheriff wouldn't be able to pin anything on him when the stove blew up and splattered old Hodge all over the cabin. There wouldn't be any evidence left. Luke could say that Hodge had been keeping the dynamite by the stove and it probably got too hot. The thing appealed to Luke's sense of humor. Old Hodge was practically killing himself.

Luke grinned and moved toward the door. He waited tensely while the old man fumbled for a match. Little beads of sweat popped out on his forehead as he heard the match scraping along the door. He heard the flare of it as it burst into flame. Hodge would be touching it to the kindling now. In a minute the flame would spread to the heavier wood and then it would be over.

Luke was just reaching for the door when he heard hoofbeats pounding into the yard. The door burst open and Sheriff Sam Murphy charged into the room, the norther howling in behind him. Luke felt like somebody had kicked him in the stomach. His face turned the color of gray wood ashes and his eyes took on the look of a trapped and desperate animal. Behind him he heard old Hodge fuming. "Close the door, yuh danged igit," the oldster growled. "Yuh blowed out my match."

SHERIFF MURPHY was a tall, raw-boned man. He stood inside the door, flapping the cold from his long arms. "Fire it up again, Hodge," he said. "It's colder'n blue blazes outside."

Cold fear clutched at Luke Crowder as Hodge reached for another match. He had to get outside. If he could get out then Hodge and the sheriff could blow themselves to Kingdom Come and his worries would be over.

Luke managed a grin. "I got to go down and feed the horses," he said casually. "Hodge is gonna cook up some flapjacks. He can set another plate for you, sheriff."

The sheriff looked at Luke and then at Hodge, but he didn't act like he was hungry. "Yuh best stay here, Luke," he said. "I got something to say and I ain't got all day to say it."

Hodge got to his feet, a worried look on his face. "You ain't in trouble, are yuh, Luke?"

Luke started to answer but Sheriff Murphy cut him off. "Chet Long was murdered last night, Hodge. It must've been around eight o'clock accordin' to the sawbones. Walt Mayberry at the livery said he seen you walkin' down the alley toward Chet's place around that time. I figured maybe I ought to talk to yuh."

Luke Crowder sucked in his breath and the sound made a jerky, rasping noise in the little room. He saw Hodge eying him strangely and he knew the old man was about to tell what he heard. Something inside the big killer snapped and he lost all reason. All he knew was that he had to

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WILD WEST QUIZ

By Idaho Bill

(Answers On Page 96)

- Which of the following best describes the *range hog* of the Old West?
Wild hog that roamed the range
Domesticated hog running wild
Cowman or sheepman who crowded others off the range
The ground hog himself
- Dead line*, in the days of sheep and cow kingdoms, was the slaughter pen
the dividing line between two ranches
the timberline where stock froze in winter
the last of the month
- The *Peacemaker*, in the lawless days of the Old West, was a name given to
the fighting Marshals
the long barreled forty-five Colt
the Judge
the Parson
- Slow elk* was the westerner's name for
buffalo
stolen beef
dog meat
deer
- Kinnikinnick*, a favorite of the Indian, was
ground meat and berries
bark used for tobacco
an Indian beverage
the home of the Great Spirit
- The *hondo*, a vital part of cowboy equipment, is
the ring on the end of his lariat
a part of the saddle
the cowboy's vest
the canteen
- What western State has never had public domain belonging to the Federal Government?
California
Utah
Texas
Oklahoma
- In the lawless days of the Wild West jails were small, flimsy affairs. For this reason bail was resorted to a great deal. When a prisoner gave *leg bail* what did he do?
Cut off a leg and leave it
Ran away from the law
Loaf around waiting for trial
Remain shackled by the legs
- What did the Wild Westerner call *graveyard stew*?
Milk
A thin soup
Water
Getting drunk on boothill
- It was against a cowboy's principle to *hoof it*, unless he had to. What was it?
Dance
Ride
Walk
Shoe a horse

Digger John's Bet

By A. A. BAKER



Here's a salty little yarn about a bet where both men were bound to win!

IN THE old days of hydraulic mining bartenders were tough. They were hired for the size of the thumb and forefinger and any man with a big pinch usually matched the size of his hands. A drink was collected by the hairy hand of the bar-keep digging deep into your poke and extracting a pinch of gold. The big hearted keeps let a little dribble on the floor so's the swamper could pan out enough for an eyeopener in the morning.

After a big night in the saloon, the swamper panned enough out to stand up there with the customers and let the pinch be taken from HIS poke.

The diggings at Gold Run were producing, and every night the boys would roar in and give the saloons a play, then roll over to the Hall and give the dancing a whirl. The water

was running high from the mountains and after a day spent tearing up the hills and washing them through sluice boxes they were mighty anxious to get the chill out of the blood.

They posted a rifle guard up in the brush to watch over the sluice boxes and came to town to make noise. Crowd fifteen hundred miners in ten bars and the noise has to go somewhere. It scared the mountain lions and bears deep into the canyons; it even reached down to the American River and hearing, the snipers would take out on a trot over the dark trails to join in.

Among the noisiest was Digger John when he hit a pocket. He'd whosh into town with a bray like a Long Tom and splatter gold dust like a snow storm on the summit. He'd made some big strikes but couldn't

stand to be tied down so would sell out, have a spurge and tramp back into the hills until he hit it again.

Digger was big and dirty; that's how he got his name. He was also one of the luckiest men in the Sierras. One strike he made while hunting squirrels. He fired a shot and laid bare a pocket worth seven thousand dollars. Another time he sat on a rock to have a snort and watch the wagons go by. The teamsters had passed that rock a hundred times and cursed it because of more than one spilled load. John idly scratched the rock with his bowie and before he was through scraping, unearthed twenty thousand dollars out of a pocket.

TIMES got bad for Digger. He got to begging drinks and laying around town. He wouldn't work in the diggings and the barkeeps threw him out of bars. Bars where he'd spent thousands of dollars. The hydraulic miners bought him drinks until the saloon owners forbade him to enter and he had to go to work.

To give Gold Run some distinction, something to stand out from other gold towns, the more staid citizens voted to erect a huge flagpole square in the center of the main street. They hauled in the largest pine to be found in the district and planted it deep into the ground. Deep enough to stand a hundred years.

Digger John worked hard to help erect the pole and climbed to the top to set the rigging. Then, three days before the fourth of July dedication, he disappeared.

Celebrations in those days lasted until the last man had drunk up his last ounce of dust. In this case the sluice boxes were paying heavy and at the end of a week she was still whooping. The tables were set in the street still heavy with victuals and the barkeeps had teamsters hauling in potents from Sacramento. One trip in was all these teamsters would make for they promptly joined the celebration.

Other camps heard the noise and came over to help christen the huge flagpole. A man was hung from the rigging and nobody was sober enough

to cut him down. One swamper threw a sluice box under the Dredgers Bar and was getting rich from what the barkeeps dribbled down to him until a shotgun guard got exuberant and blasted a hole in the floor.

AT THE celebration's height, a roar was heard and miners, looking down main street, saw Digger John. He'd made another pocket and he was back in stride.

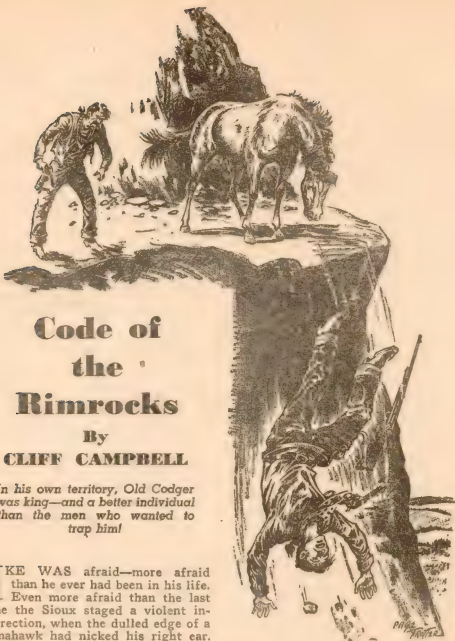
Up the street he swept, from saloon to saloon, leaving gold dust in his wake. Now the Digger wasn't an argumentative man, but when he made a statement, he didn't like anyone to question its truth. He'd held up his end of many a bar fight and was known to be fairly honest and no truth-stretcher. Therefore, many men gathered around when they heard him arguing with a gambler in Dredgers Bar. The gambler, one Slim Deakins, was known throughout the diggings as being well-to-do and also of an honest pattern.

What the argument was about no one seemed to catch at first. Digger was saying "it will" and Slim Deakins was saying "it won't!" Well, as those things go, they finally got up a bet. And what a bet! None such before or since has been heard. The loser was to buy all drinks for the town tipplers. The barkeeps were gathered and, as the funds of the miners were running low and the celebration slacking off, they agreed to keep open house until the bet was settled.

FOR three more days the drinking and whooping went on. Free drinks! Nobody went back to camp. More miners hiked in. The wornout dancing girls were replaced by imports from Sacramento and as far west as 'Frisco. The lower valley was drained of teamsters who wouldn't go back for another load.

The barkeeps began to wonder how long the two bettors would hold out, because the bill was mounting and they themselves were running out of money to buy more liquor and hire more one-way teamsters. So they gathered in the Dredgers Bar to find out.

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Code of the Rimrocks

By
CLIFF CAMPBELL

In his own territory, Old Codger was king—and a better individual than the men who wanted to trap him!

IKE WAS afraid—more afraid than he ever had been in his life. Even more afraid than the last time the Sioux staged a violent insurrection, when the dulled edge of a tomahawk had nicked his right ear.

For Ike was going East—far East, all the way to New York—to shoot a man in the back. The front wouldn't do; it had to be in the back. There was no other death that the man deserved.

It made Ike uncomfortable just thinking about it. He had killed seven men—not counting Indians—

and always the slug had come out the back. For No. 8 the code ordained the bullet should go in the back and come out the front.

Like his hair, Ike's long mustaches were gray and straggly. They drooped more disconsolately as the wheels of the Great Northern clacked

and cinders rained through the open window of the day coach.

He wore a tight-fitting suit and vest and his spindly shanks made his trousers, pushed into scarred high-heeled boots, billow when he walked. No matter how often he knocked his sombrero against his leg the red dust of the Deadlands lingered upon it.

He wasn't sure how old he was, but he must have been close to seventy. It was duly recorded that in 1888 he had married a squaw near the national cemetery where Custer and his men slept in honor. He couldn't have been a boy.

In all those years he had never deliberately set out to kill a man. Such things happened almost spontaneously—and lawmen usually understood that it couldn't have been otherwise.

But this was different. Ike doubted very much if the New York police would understand why he had to kill Dramat. They might think there was something illegal about it. There wasn't. Dramat had done a helluva thing—and still was making a fortune doing the same thing over and over again.

JUST thinking about it, Ike moved his head somberly. He recalled the first time almost two years ago when he'd met Dramat on his spread thirty miles from Billings. His ranch was big, his cattle many.

Ike had sensed immediately that Dramat wasn't a cattleman in the true meaning of the word. He looked like one, acted like one; only his booming laugh was too ready and behind its heartiness was something that Ike could not place. He later found out that the word for it was sardonic.

Now, meeting him again, Dramat greeted him effusively. "You're famous in these parts, Pop," he said too smoothly. "They tell me you're the best hunter in the Deadlands."

Ike nodded. "I'm fair-to-middlin' I suppose. Why?"

"I want you to get the Old Codger for me."

Ike rocked back on his heels, staring in amazement. He straightened and spat deliberately. "The Old

Codger knows more about the Deadlands than I'll ever know. I've been trailing him—and losing him—for nigh onto twelve-fifteen years. He's the greatest hunter in these parts."

"I know that," Dramat said impatiently. "That's why I sent for you; you know his moods."

"Shore do," Ike said enviously. "He takes what he wants, young or old. But he shore as hell is choosy sometimes. He's smart."

"Hell!" Dramat snorted. "He's just a horse."

Ike shook his head. "No he ain't. If there's a horse god he's damned near it."

"Poppycock. He's just an old scavenger. He raids and takes off the best mares and fillies. His is the biggest herd in the territory. Without him the herd will stay in the hills in winter."

"Horses got to eat," Ike said laconically, looking suggestively at the big paunch on Dramat.

Dramat avoided Ike's eyes. "When snow gets deep my cattle have trouble getting forage. If the wild horse herd gets there first there is no food. My cattle starve even though my riders and wagons bring hay to them."

Ike nodded understandingly. Grass, feet deep under the hard snows, was precious. It was an old complaint of all ranchers.

"Puttin' a rope on the Old Codger is goin' to be quite a job," Ike muttered. "He's smart. I been trying for years and never got close yet."

"You won't have to do it alone. My men will be there to help. Can you tell me where he will be a month or six weeks from now?"

"Nope."

"Do you know where he is now?"

"Wouldn't be surprised that I do. His custom when Winter is nigh is to start driftin' out of the Deadlands, through the Badlands and onto these Montana flats. He stays hidden right on the edges until snow forces him into the open. Right now he's probably holed-up between thirty and sixty miles above Deadwood. It'll take some huntin' to find him."

Dramat's eyes glittered. He opened

a fat wallet. "One hundred to haze him into the Matache—paid in advance." He thrust bills into Ike's hand. "And one thousand bounty to you for getting the Old Codger personally."

"He'll be dratted hard to put a rope around," Ike hedged. "I been close enough to him three times to try it. He outfoxed me."

"You were that close?" Dramat said incredulously, "and you left him get away?"

"Sho. What else was there to do?"

"Shoot him!"

Ike looked his disbelief. "Shoot him!" he said incredulously. "Why a man don't shoot a horse in these parts unless said horse is hurt so bad that he's helped by being shot. An' no hunter would ever think of shootin' the Old Codger."

"Why?" Dramat snorted.

"Because," Ike said simply, "he can't shoot back."

Dramat looked past Ike at his foreman, his face knitted in concentration. He knew he had made a mistake; he had heard of old timers like Ike with codes as old as the West itself. But perhaps it wasn't too late to get wily Ike on the payroll . . .

Beetle-browed Blackie Branca's boots kicked up dust as he sided almost silently from the corral to stand near Dramat. His too-red and mean mouth made a fleeting smile at Ike.

IKE looked steadily down at Branca, and did not like what he saw. Just a few short years before, Branca had been generally regarded as a small-time rustler; and he had never bothered to deny the rumor. Then Dramat had showed up and bought a spread, and overnight Branca had achieved a respectability of sorts as foreman. To Ike that move had never made sense.

"Couldn't help overhearing," Branca said, winking covertly at Dramat. "There's the right way and the wrong way to do things here. Mr. Dramat doesn't understand that yet. The Old Codger would be more valuable to us as a ranch stallion than a dead raider. We want him alive."

Ike watched Branca's little eyes forcing themselves into a bland stare.

Success was not achieved. Something was wrong here, something difficult to decipher.

Dramat said heartily. "Branca's right. We want him alive and we want some of his mares. He's stolen a lot of top hoss flesh. I want to own the mares and some of the better colts. You just haze the herd somewhere near here where Branca and my men can get a rope on a few of them."

Ike hesitated. There was an inner whisper of warning, but the answer wouldn't come. The explanation made sense. The Old Codger was probably the greatest range stallion in the country, and his harem was elite. The herd itself would be worth many thousands to any ranch owner, not counting how much grass could be saved from the sudden and devastating raids of the wild bands.

Ike said: "It's worth more than one thousand." He was thinking it was time he settled down. He had three hundred in the bank at Billings and he needed to settle down. A man can't make his saddle his seat, his pillow and his home forever . . .

"Hell, boss," Branca said. "It's worth plenty to get them in a blind where he can pick and choose. We need a top remuda."

Dramat looked at Branca and abruptly peeled off another hundred dollars. "Two hundred to haze the Old Codger into the Matache—and two thousand bounty if we get the Old Codger."

Ike made a whistling breath. Here was twenty-two hundred dollars, enough to give him independence for life. After all, he was somewhere around seventy, and the trails were getting dim at times.

He took the hundred. "In the Matache early in August," he said. "Keep your lookouts posted. You can't miss it; it's a big herd an' I won't be drivin' it fast. Jest doin' a little bedevilin'. I think I can make the Old Codger try to make a run through the Tahita Pass."

Dramat gripped his hand warmly. "That'll be good enough. My men will be waiting on the far end and close in after you from the rear. We'll get the Old Codger."

Ike shook his head doubtfully. "Don't gamble on it, mister. He's smart. Like I said: 'If there's a god among horses he's damned near it.' You're just human."

"Hum-m," Dramat growled. He watched Ike ride away on his old black mare before turning to Branca. "Gods and horses," he snorted. "The old buzzard is just a plain damned fool. Locoed, maybe . . ."

"Maybe," Branca muttered. "The Deadlands an' all the critters in it are his life. Maybe horses gotta god too . . ."

Dramat looked at him in surprise. Coming from a man like Branca such thoughts bordered on heresy. Dramat abruptly swung on his heel and said: "Get lookouts before August. Old Codger may decide to make a run for it and come early."

Branca nodded and continued to stare at the dark figure of Ike fading into the Deadlands. "Okay," he said, shrugging his squat body. "Only I wish you could have got somebody besides Old Ike. He isn't goin' to like this."

"Poppycock!"

Branca had an inner hunch it wasn't anything of the sort. He went to the bunkhouse and drank half a bottle in one soothing draught.

* * *

IT WAS as Ike had expected. He rode into the Deadlands, and in every pass among the gaunt rocks were tracks. Some came around the abrupt bends; others came out. And, for an amateur, an endless ride would always bring him back to his starting point if he were lucky enough to recognize it as such.

That, too, was difficult. All draws and passes and rocks looked the same except that the moody sun suddenly would disappear and shine again contrary to directional expectations. When it should be before you, it was behind; when it should be to your left it would bafflingly glitter to your right before fading again.

Ike rode almost unerringly around the numerous bends. He scorned ascending the rock crests. That would have been utterly baffling to

a newcomer. The disconsolate rocks would stretch endlessly in almost similarity in four directions. It was the original Never-Never Land. (Never-never to come out again, Ike had labelled it years before.)

There were springs in there, but it took a smart man to find them. Riding due North, Ike looked and drank at three—and patted the mare reassuringly. There was fresh dung miles from the fourth. That made Ike grunt in satisfaction. He veered away, riding Northeast.

Hours later he swung off the mare and climbed stiffly up the rocky side of a horseshoe-formed rock. His progress was agonizingly slow. He realized anew that Dramat's offer was a good one. He was becoming too old for this; it was time he settled down. There was two hundred in his jeans, three hundred in the bank in Billings, and the two thousand bounty on Old Codger's head. That was the kind of security a man wanted when he couldn't manage any other sort anymore.

As he had guessed, there below in an amazing expanse of green shrub growth—a defile of the North Atlantic wind currents—was the herd.

Flat on his stomach, peering from behind a boulder, Ike looked down. As a stone drops—flying forward—Ike could have spit on the Old Codger's head one hundred feet below.

He looked as usual—kingly and domineering. Perhaps it was the shadows of the draw, but Ike thought he spotted grayish blotches in that once-rough sorrel hide. The neck still arched proudly and the cream-colored tail and mane flowed long and briars mangled and curled them as though to affront all conventions. His nose was scarred from bites and there were black patches on his legs from vicious kicks of too-ambitious younger stallions. There was a gauntness under his high-power binocular eyes, but his heavy muscles hid the hunted hungriness of the Deadlands.

Ike looked at the rest of the herd and softly whistled. He moved with the soundlessness of a lizard to another boulder to look and count again.

In the small oasis they nibbled futilely at grass roots, some stunted, all hungry. They had to move soon. Ike noticed with surprise that a half-dozen young stallions roamed on the fringes.

"Old Codger knows he's slippin', I guess," Ike told himself. "Hired himself some assistants who ain't too ambitious." He looked again at the herd that numbered more than he could count—maybe three hundred or more.

"Biggest damn herd in all creation," he mumbled. He looked in admiration at the Old Codger. "You're a real hunter, pard," he muttered. "You robbed and you've fought and you've raised one helluva big family—and in the Deadlands too."

HE MOVED soundlessly back to his first boulder. Then he spat deliberately.

Old Codger snorted, wheeled and looked upward. Slowly Ike came erect on his spindly legs and looked levelly at Old Codger.

The long tail swished as if in greeting and the nubs of ears cropped by many far below zero winters twitched forward.

For a moment he seemed unafraid of Ike, welcoming him as one of the Deadlands own, a foe worthy of all his wile.

Ike felt his old heart pump in sudden pride. He knew the Old Codger recognized him and respected him. It was good to have someone respect you.

"Been three years since I saw you before, pard," he said aloud. "Three time you won; this time it's my turn."

At the sound of his voice the heads of grazing horses had lifted. They stood in indecision.

Old Codger's ears went back until he looked like he had none at all. He whirled suddenly, his tail high and waving at Ike, and made a sound the like of which Ike had never heard. It wasn't a snort; it wasn't a whinny; but more like the clear notes of an urgent bugle.

The herd took off, bending to the rocks winding due South.

Ike stood on his lofty pinnacle

grinning and chewing the straggly ends of his mustache.

At the far end of the oasis, Old Codger, the last to make the turn, turned and looked speculatively at Ike.

Ike made a great show of apparently hurrying down to his mare.

When he reached her he mounted slowly, and walked her cautiously around the rocks, weaving interminably in and out, until a half hour later he ascended to the oasis. There was still a little water in the spring, and Ike again gave credit to the Old Codger for being a real overlord to such an immense herd. Rationing had been in effect.

He hobbled and unsaddled the mare, unrolled his bed roll and went peacefully asleep with his head on the saddle knowing the Old Codger would be hazing his herd in full flight the whole night long, the next day and night, and the night after. Then they would meet again.

AT DAWN he rode North, directly opposite from the Old Codger's line of flight.

He pushed the mare slowly and insistently for two days, conserving her strength and gradually bending to the Northwest. Then in the darkness that night they turned South.

When close onto the flats near the edge of the Badlands, Ike dismounted and wearily climbed to the heights. His old eyes squinting in the unaccustomed bright day looked baffled. Below was desolation, intense and foreboding. He had expected a small dust cloud in the distance. It looked like the Old Codger had lived up to his name and outfoxed him again. The stallion always had been a great one to head far in one direction and then turn abruptly around without reason and return, but always drifting West. To the East was wire and to return to the Deadlands with Winter coming on was suicide. To the West were the deep snows but little wire. And under the padded snows was grass . . .

Ike snapped the fingers of his caloused right hand in agitation.

"I'm just a plain damned fool," he said aloud.

He returned to the mare and that night pushed her hard in an almost straight line for Neill's Creek that flowed tantalizingly close to the Badlands.

He'd expected the Old Codger relentlessly to drive his herd past two water holes and make for the third in an abrupt backtracking. But the Old Codger must be desperate. He'd by-passed three holes to head West in a long, steady and exhausting drive.

Ike could imagine the younger colts tottering unsteadily on their spindly legs and the heads of the mares hanging low in utter tiredness.

Ike had them, he thought, if he could keep them from resting. None of them—not even the Old Codger himself—could go on forever.

His thin shanks pounded an insistent tattoo on the mare's sides. She was making a hard run but nothing comparable to that of the herd despite the weight she carried.

The sudden flushing of the herd near dawn above the water hole just fifteen miles from the Matache took Ike by surprise. Grudgingly he admitted the Old Codger almost had foxed him again, permitting the herd to drink and then driving it North instead of West on the edge of the Badlands where there was no forage and the herd logically shouldn't have been expected to bed down.

He was making the bend through a narrow rock defile when he heard the shrill whinny of warning almost directly in front of him. There were sounds of an uneasy shifting like an army aroused from deep sleep. Then hoofs started to pound until they reached a crescendo, going in planned flight West.

Listening, Ike knew he was on the Old Codger's trail. This was a huge herd. There was no doubt of it.

That started the game of hide-and-seek, the brains of the two greatest hunters in the Badlands pitted against each other.

Ike would drive forward on his weary mare, then baffling swing far to the North or South and be waiting for the herd to come up or down accustomed paths. But always the herd went West—toward the Matache.

ON THE third day the herd was bazed into the open flatlands. Old Codger had no choice now. He had to make a run for it. The blue-green hills of the Matache lay far in the distance. There was food there and a sanctuary of sorts.

Ike rested his mare and looked again in amazement at the huge dust cloud the many hoofs made. On the fringes he could see the Old Codger, his neck still high and his tail flowing, biting, kicking and hazing the weary stragglers. Again Ike felt a grudging admiration for the great horse. In his steady and violent patrols behind the herd he certainly must have ran more than twice the already killing distance Ike had forced the herd to take without pause for food. Yet he seemed to draw on some secret well of energy, an indomitable will to protect his family. The pace he was setting seemed staggeringly swift. Ike found his mare dropping behind, her head sagging far forward, her feet stumbling unsteadily at times.

The dust cloud drew into the distance, but Ike was satisfied. Old Codger was driving it straight for the Matache. There the Old Codger expected to lose Ike in the blinds and draws once he'd gone through the pass.

Ike guessed that the pass might be open, with Dramat's men not there. He was exceeding calculations. The flushing of the herd had come faster than he'd expected.

But Ike knew a deep and inner satisfaction. He'd outfoxed the Old Codger this time. If the Old Codger got his herd safely away through the Matache, Ike would simply raise his hand in salute, a brief hosanna from one veteran of the Deadlands to another. The Old Codger played the game like Ike—brutal and hard and fair, using every wile at his command . . .

Ike pulled his mare to an abrupt halt. He stood in the stirrups, his scrawny neck bent forward.

* * *

The herd was turning, milling in panic. In the distance Ike thought

he saw the dusty forms of horses fall, before others plunged recklessly ahead.

Ike's spurs raked the mare's sides. She grunted in protest and broke into a laborious lope.

It seemed to take agonizingly long hours to cover the distance before Ike saw the first dead horses. Some were still, others trying futilely to rise on shattered legs. Bullets had riddled their hides with reckless abandon.

Ike carefully made sure all horses were dead—carefully shooting four wounded horses—before mounting the mare and again driving her forward to the mouth of the Matache.

That such a thing should occur was past his understanding. Nobody gunned horses in these parts. A horse was a god. Without a horse the West never would have been built. True, oxen had helped somewhat, but horses had kept the West alive and breathing thing.

The dust cloud was gone, and if there was one inside of the Matache, the rimrocks obscured it. Ike felt an ominous premonition that there was no dust cloud, that the herd had stepped into a devilishly-conceived trap of some hybrid that called himself a man.

And Ike felt guilty. If there had been a trap, he—Ike—had driven the Old Codger there, and that certainly was no way to treat an old pard who respected you as much as you respected him . . .

The sharp whine of a high-powered bullet passing overhead shocked him out of his musings. He pulled the mare to a stop and his keen eyes sought the rimrocks again. The ragged crags looked innocent and serene enough.

He thought he heard the racketing of quick shots in the pass and the squeals of terrified horses. But he couldn't be sure.

The mare gave a sharp grunt and wobbled forward a few steps. Only then did he hear the sound of a shot. He had his right leg in the air and was stiffly dismounting when a pile-driver hit his left shoulder and knocked him clear of the falling mare.

PAGE fought pain in utter bafflement. He crawled painfully across the narrow stretch to the protection of the feebly-kicking mare. Ike shot her in the head and when the legs were still he crawled close to her protecting belly using her body as a shield against the menace of the rimrocks.

Lying there, breathing heavily, the enormity of what had happened occurred to him. He had been ambushed, coldly and deliberately, without apparent rhyme or reason. And for why? Certainly it wasn't that Dramat would rather kill than pay out a piker's two thousand bonus for the capture of Old Codger.

Thinking about the Old Codger, Ike cursed silently. It seemed certain that he—Ike—had driven the old fellow into some sort of a trap for which Old Codger didn't have a chance to defend himself. There had been no fair play in the whole deal, Ike felt positive.

The sun rose high in the heavens as Ike silently scanned the rimrocks. The sun was far to the West before a mounted man came out of the pass onto the flats and cautiously approached the dark blot of the slain mare.

Ike's gnarled hand tightened on his six-gun. A high-powered rifle lay across the rider's pommel and glinted ominously in the sun. Ike lay tense, his shoulder a throbbing pain. The slug apparently had struck just above the armpit and left a jagged and clean wound without touching bone.

As the rider neared, Ike grunted in satisfaction. It was Dramat's foreman, Blackie Branca. Ike knew then that he had been duped into flushing the Old Codger—and on accepting the job had marked himself for murder.

Ike saw the rifle raise, level down on him, and heard the thud of the slug bury itself into the mare's body.

Ike held his fire. The range was too far for a six-gun.

Apparently satisfied that Ike was dead or unconscious, Branca abruptly wheeled and started back to the rimrocks.

"Playin' it safe," Ike muttered. "Damned lousy murderin' coyote."

When dusk descended, Ike loosened the canteen from the saddle and started painfully on foot across the flats.

It was a long walk but he was safely in the protecting hills when the sun arose. He angled up a steep grade that would put him on top of the rimrocks. There he could look down into the pass and from that vantage point might get an answer as to Old Codger's fate and why a murder ambush had been set for himself. He could think of no plausible answer. This was something new in the grim history of the Deadlands...

He knew of one safe hiding place halfway down the pass, a narrow defile in an apparent blind that offered the only outlet from the pass when the entrances were blocked. It wasn't more than three feet wide at its widest point and a sheer path led to the top of the rimrocks hidden behind the protecting rocks.

He thought Branca might have found that narrow entrance and from the height had set up his shooting gallery. If so, Branca was smarter than Ike had given him credit for. Very few Deadlands hunters had ever discovered this almost invisible break in the rocky walls.

At its top was a plateau no larger than a good-sized rug a man might use on his parlor floor.

Ike avoided the path hidden even to his trained eye and made his painful way along the top of the rocks, where he could angle into the plateau from above and then look almost sheerly down into the pass. He was weaving dizzily in the hot sun, his shoulder a swollen and festering thing when he finally dropped to the grassy ledge of the plateau.

Back near the wall he heard a snort and his hand streaked to his gun, then paused. The Old Codger was pressed flat against the wall, his proud head lowered, his tail hanging disconsolately. He reminded Ike of pictures of fighters he'd seen after they had fought a bitter and heart-breaking battle. His ears were back, his teeth bared, but there was indecision in his dulled eyes.

IKE made a soft reassuring sound in his throat. Old Codger still looked undecided. Ike tottered to the edge of the rimrocks and looked down. Then he abruptly backed away and sat down flat on the plateau, holding his gray head in his good hand.

He moaned softly and crawled to the shade of the wall and lay flat on his back. Tears coursed unashamedly down his cheeks.

Finally the horror of what he had seen dulled and he slept feverishly. The Old Codger took a limping step forward, then backed again against the wall, resting his whole weight upon it.

The pair slept in a small, friendly world of their own making, but high above the brutal world as represented by mankind.

Ike awoke during the night and crawled to the edge and looked down again. The ghouls still were working feverishly. The huge herd lay in a piled and bloodied mass. Every horse was down although some were making futile attempts to rise. These wounded horses the men disregarded, permitting them to live in helpless misery.

In the light of the bonfires Ike could see the heavy wagons piled with the horse flesh and horse hides. Each horse was being butchered with the trained skill of a surgeon. The long cutting knives flashed in the light of the flames, skinning and dismembering with sure and swift skill.

Perhaps there were twenty men. Ike wasn't sure. But among them he failed to locate either Dramat or Branca. They were the ones who had conceived this horror; the ghouls at work simply were stooges.

Ike crawled back to the wall again, knowing a futility he never had known in his life.

Why should anybody want to kill and butcher an entire horse herd? It was not just to protect the precious grass. If that had been all there would be no need to butcher the horses and cart them away in heavy, blood-soaked wagons. Vowing vengeance, Ike dropped feverishly asleep again.

THE thud of a boot against his leg brought him awake.

Branca stood above him, his rifle pointed downward.

"You're tough, old timer," he said, "but not tough enough. I thought I got you yesterday. Only now it looks like I hit the jackpot by not killing you." He made a negligent gesture to where the Old Codger stood against the wall, unmoving. But his croppy ears were back and his teeth bared. Through sick eyes he was glaring at Branca's back.

"We got what we wanted—the herd—and now it looks like we got what we didn't expect to get alive—the Old Codger. He was the only one who got away. I saw him over near the wall when the shooting started—and then he was gone like a ghost. This morning I found that little break in the rocks and followed the blood on the trail up here." He grinned mirthlessly. "But I didn't expect to find you."

"Why—why—" Ike began in puzzlement, getting groggily to his feet. The plateau seemed to be tipping and swaying under his feet.

"We got almost a quarter million pounds of good, prime hoss meat," Branca said. "Only we knew a sucker like you wouldn't like the way we got it. Dramat and me figgered it best to keep you quiet—permanently." The rifle was rising and almost touching Ike's thin chest when he threw his right hand to his left and spun right. He felt his hand touch the rifle and push it away. With the motion he reached for his six-gun—knowing he didn't have a chance. The rifle was swinging around to cover him before his hand had touched his holstered gun.

Then, miraculously, Branca was spinning out into the plateau, helplessly surging toward the sheer cliff. He was still clutching his rifle—his face set in terror and amazement—when he disappeared. Ike heard his shrill cry briefly. Then there was silence—deep and ominous.

Ike made his eyes focus. They were like hot coals in his head. Old Codger was before him, tottering on his left foreleg, his right still up-

raised. Ike knew instinctively that he had surged from the wall in an attempt to trample Branca with one forefoot. The first vicious blow against his back had sent Branca tumbling over the precipice.

Old Codger looked speculatively at Ike, and gradually his flattened ears came erect. Ike had passed muster . . .

Ike noticed then the bullet holes in the left foreleg. Of the three one had shattered a tendon, but the bone structure seemed firm enough.

Ike got his canteen and poured water in his battered hat. When he approached, Old Codger snorted and backed limpingly away. Ike placed the hat on the ground and went back to sleep.

Later Old Codger cautiously approached Ike and sniffed. Then he sniffed the hat and finally drank. Then he, too, went back near the wall, sagged against it with his weight off his wounded leg and went to sleep.

* * *

FOR days they made a strange pair of Deadland waifs—two sorely-hurt animals who understood each other. Old Codger couldn't walk the steep path leading down into the pass. By a supreme effort of will, Ike made the trip, bringing back water. Then it came Old Codger's turn. He'd been able to live on the sparse grass and gather strength; Ike had not. Daily he became weaker until finally he knew they had to get below. He started Old Codger down the trail, clinging to his tail.

Once in the pass he tried to mount Old Codger, but no man ever had ridden Old Codger and they say to this day that nobody ever has. He suffered Ike to cling to his tail, sometimes dragging him as he limped ploddingly forward across the flatlands.

Ike doesn't know how he got there, but one morning Tim Shane found him outside his cabin in the dust. There were huge hoof tracks in this almost dangerously civilized territory

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*They'd get Pistol Frank Land
all right; Hundy knew that.
But the cost would be exor-
bitant.*



PARLEY AT WHISKEY CREEK

By T. W. FORD

THEY had Pistol Frank Land penned up down there on Whiskey Creek. But that didn't mean they had him captured; it looked as if the dead might be stacked high before he was. For Pistol Frank was inside the Devil's Hook at the bend of the creek with plenty of grub, a box of extra shells, and a firm determination to rot in there before he came out to be hung. He had shouted that conviction out to Sheriff Mundy and his posse in several versions and with some choice expletives. Now the skinny, brick-faced sheriff strode the bank opposite the Devil's Hook and mopped his forehead worriedly.

He didn't know what to do. Pistol Frank was a dangerous gunslinger, tough as a stove-dried boot. His

nerve wouldn't crack easily. He was wanted for the killing of a six-year-old girl by a stray bullet during a four-man gun battle in Creosote Forks and feeling was savage against him. If he failed to get Frank Land, the sheriff knew he might as well turn in his badge. That posse, spread along the creek bank, had fully intended to string him up on the handiest cottonwood the minute they grabbed him. But none of them craved to go into the Hook to get him; it would have been little short of suicide.

"Well, what the blazes are you going to do, ya John Laws?" bawled a voice from down at the crossing. "Wait fer him to die of sheep tick?"

The sheriff mopped his head again and cut his eyes at Gerry, second in

command of the posse, whom he had made a special deputy for the occasion. Gerry was one of the fastest trigger slammers down on Mogollon Flats, a cold-blooded big bull of a man. But Gerry just scrubbed his nose with the back of his hand and stared hard at the entrance to the Hook. Mundy looked up at the crossing. Something had to be done. There was a whole pack of folks there, waiting and watching, who'd come down the hill from nearby Elcinto to witness the payoff.

"We could draw lots," one of the other possemen said, stepping up. "The losers could rush him, say half of us. Mebbe one might wound him. Then the others could follow 'em in—"

Mundy was already shaking his head. He knew the Devil's Hook, had been inside it himself. You couldn't rush that place. Because once you got inside the cavellike entrance, it narrowed to a thin corridor. Scooped out by the water in a great layer of rock ages ago when the creek was higher, it got its name from the way it hooked around in a sharp right angle about twenty feet back. And around the hook, it widened into a good-sized chamber. That was where Pistol Frank Land calmly waited now.

FIRING from around the wall of the bend, he could give them hell if they tried to get in. And always he could retreat into the chamber itself and plug them as they rounded the turn. It was a tough proposition. Mundy cursed softly as he gazed through the willows to where they had tethered Pistol Frank's horse and pack pony. That last meant the wanted man had toted in plenty of supplies with him, that he wasn't bluffing much when he'd yelled out he could sit it out forever and a day.

"Figure we could smoke him out, sheriff?" Gerry finally came up with a suggestion.

Again Mundy was forced to shake his head. He recalled eighteen or twenty years back when a posse had cornered Laredo Hallman in there. They had tried smoking him out but in vain. In the ceiling of the interior

there were fissures that permitted the smoke to escape.

Fresh jeers came from the impatient mob up at the creek crossing. "You lily-livered pelicans, why'n't you go in? Do you need a special invitation?"

The sheriff's mouth hardened into a thin seam bisecting his red face. Then he pulled off his sombrero, removed his calfskin vest, and began peeling out of his shirt. There was one slim—dangled slim—chance. And as the representative of the Law, it was up to him to take it. He would have the possemen wade out into the shallows and pour a steady fire into the entrance as if preparing to rush it. Then he himself, after crossing to the other bank further down, would work his way up through the deep water with just his head and arms out and try to slip in unobserved in the excitement. The creek flowed a few feet into the Hook. He might just catch Pistol Frank at the moment when his hogleg was empty. Or he might possibly get in a lucky shot and wound him before the cornered man spotted him. But the odds were heavily against either happening.

Gerry said, "Are you locoed?" after listening to the sheriff's plan.

Lean Mundy shrugged as he dropped off his shirt. The breeze played around his bare fleshless ribs. Across two of them on the left side was an old dull-red bullet scar. Pistol Frank's brother, Big Joe Land, had given him that years ago when he had been a deputy. Mundy had put a slug in Big Joe's leg. But the man had gotten away from him. Later, Big Joe Land had been captured, served his time in the Big House, then disappeared after his release. And Pistol Frank was rated a slicker article with a hogleg than his brother. The sheriff sucked in his breath hard.

"If—if anything goes wrong," he told Gerry, "tell my wife I—"

It was then that the travelling parson came around the bend downstream on his crowbait. He was a tall gaunt man in rusty black, hollow-eyed, with the air of a big scarecrow. The bones protruded from his gaunt

face. When he lifted his hat a moment it revealed thinning hair prematurely gray at the temples. He reined up, let his eyes swing over them, then pronounced:

"This looks like a scene of violence, brethren!" Mundy had a feeling he had heard that voice before, but it seemed unlikely. He never had given much time to prayer meetings or revival rallies despite his wife's entreaties.

"It's Parson Joe Andrews, the miracle preacher!" cried one of the Elcinto citizens who had come down from the crossing. He told how the preacher had saved a man bitten by a rattler over at Wagonwheel last month. The sawbones had given up on the poor devil, pronounced him dead. But the parson had prayed and through the night and somehow saved him. "He was wonderful, I tell you!"

"Mebbe he could git Pistol Frank outa that cave if he's so wonderful," said Gerry drily.

Parson Andrews had dismounted and came walking through the willows, fixing them with a stern-eyed stare. "He who lives by the sword shall perish—" he started to quote, then broke off when he spotted Mundy's badge.

The Elcinto man stepped forward to pump the long-legged preacher's hand and explained the situation.

"It's Pistol Frank Land in there," the sheriff added.

The parson only nodded, then swung his gaze toward the town, Elcinto, up at the top of the long slope from the creek. But other townsfolk had come down the bank. Several more of them recognized the parson. They crowded around.

"Parson, you could get him to come out! You could!" several of them insisted. "They say you can talk the Devil himself to shame!"

Mundy sat down to remove his boots. He figured to be able to work upstream faster without them. "Better git back, folks."

"You'll die for sure if you try to go in," the parson said.

"You could do it, Parson Joe! You could!" the crowd insisted. The

possemen looked skeptical. An Elcinto man railed at them. "Don't sneer, you gents! The parson's a miracle-worker. And he ain't afear'd of nothing, of nothing at all!"

Parson Andrews' stiffened. His burning eyes ran over the throng of people who so deeply believed in him. Then he removed his hat.

"Maybe I could do something," he said slowly. "I'll talk to him. . ."

BEFORE he did, the parson stepped back into the trees, turned his back on everybody, and stood several moments with bowed head. He drew something from an inside pocket and then seemed to be fussing with the buckle of his belt. Mundy wondered if the man was bluffing. Then the parson returned and clambered aboard one of the posse's ponies. The breeze plastered his flopping coat against his gaunt body. All his clothes seemed too loose for him. He faced the pony toward the cave across the stream and sang out:

"Frank Land! Frank Land in there?"

"What the devil do you want now?" came back a muffled voice from inside the Hook. "Do you have to interrupt a man's siesta?"

"I'm Parson Andrews!" the preacher man boomed. "I'm coming in to have a talk with you."

"Stay out, parson!" Pistol Frank's voice came back in sharp warning. "I've got four hoglegs and a carbine in here. Anybody who tries to come in gits a winda in his skull!"

"I'm coming in, Frank!"

"These Colts of mine are plumb aching for action!"

"I wear no Colts," the preacher man called back. "I want none. And I'm coming in." One of the posse offered him a .45 to stick inside his shirt but the parson refused it. He started the pony across the creek.

The throng watched, breathing tightly. The current swirled up over the stirrups at midstream. It deepened nearer the ledge of rock in front of the Devil's Hook. Pistol Frank was watching; he yelled a warning to the parson to stop. Preacher Joe Andrews urged the horse ahead.

Then he was swinging from the saddle onto the ledge. "Here I come, Frank. You can see I wear no gun-belt." And he ducked his head to disappear inside.

Sheriff Mundy swallowed audibly and cursed himself. He shouldn't have let that helpless fool try it. Pistol Frank was as dangerous as a coiled sidewinder, knowing the posse would make a cottonwood apple of him without bothering to take him back for trial.

Inside the parson saw the dull-gleaming spike of the fugitive's gun barrel around the bend. He strode unhesitatingly through the shallow water and advanced. The gun vanished as Pistol Frank retreated back into the bigger chamber.

"When you round the turn, be praying!" he called. "And pray fast. 'Cause you won't have long, mister."

"My prayers are said," called back Parson Joe Andrews. "I've come to pray for you, Frank." He made the turn and stepped full into the glow of a chunk of candle the fugitive had burning on a can in the deeper chamber. Behind the candle, crouched against the back wall, waited Pistol Frank, a couple of big Colts levelled before him.

"Hello, Frank," said the parson. "I'm Parson Joe Andrews."

Pistol Frank's mouth shot open. His head thrust forward. Then his lean leather-hued face became an adamant mask once more, the dots of fiery eyes under the sun-bleached brows becoming again pinpoints of menace.

"So you thought you could talk me outa here, Joe, eh?" he snapped in his dry husky voice.

PUSHING back his coat, the parson advanced to within a couple of yards. He nodded. Their eyes scoured each other slowly.

"You got to come out, Frank. A heap of men will get killed if you fight. And sooner or laater, they'll get you."

Pistol Frank's mouth twisted. "Don't give me the soft talk, Joe. Mebbe they'll git tired of dying. They

can go to—" He was going to say "hell" but didn't.

"Killing is bad stuff, Frank. I know. Either you pay for it on this earth or in the hereafter, Frank."

"Don't try to scare me, Joe," Pistol Frank sneered. His guns had lowered but he still radiated menace. "I'll play my cards my own way."

The parson sighed and bumped his head against a protuberance on the roof of the cave as he shifted. "In the name of the Lord, Frank, I'm asking you to come out and surrender! . . . You can't escape, Frank."

Pistol Frank sagged a little, moving out out from the back wall. He put one of his guns on the can beside the candle and picked up an open bottle of redeye. After a slug, he shook his head again. A snarl formed on his mouth.

"No! I won't! I never killed that girl in Creosote Forks, but they hunted me down like a coyote. Tried to kill me without a trial! They made the rules of the game. So now let the dang coyotes pay my price if they want me!"

"Blood-letting settles nothing, Frank!" Parson Joe pleaded. "Vengeance belongs to the Almighty. Come out and—"

"They'd string me up the moment they got their dewclaws on me!"

"I'll get 'em to swear they won't—to promise to take you back for trial!"

Pistol Frank shook his head. "Naw! Halfway down the trail, they'd forgit their word. . . Now, git out, Joe. Git out! I can hold out for weeks—till they git a bellyful. Only thing I forgot to bring in me with was some chewing tobacco. But—"

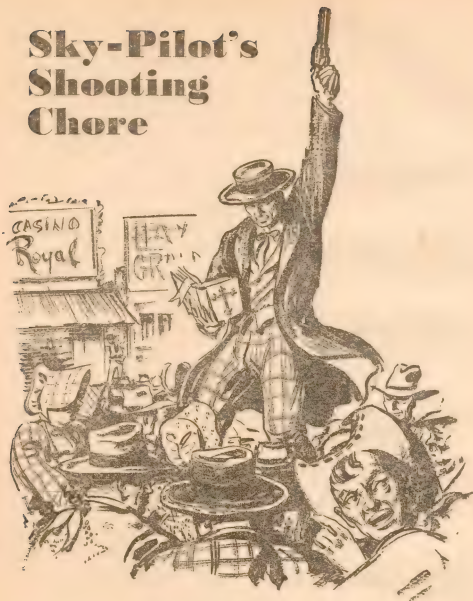
"Here." The parson poked in a coat pocket and brought out a slab of cut plug. "Take half, Frank."

The fugitive grabbed it. Then he put down his second Colts and produced a knife to split the plug. The parson's right hand moved to the waistband of his trousers. Pistol Frank's beads of eyes jumped.

"Don't you think it'd be better to come out alive, Frank," the gaunt parson said softly. "Alive. . . I'll git their promise, I swear."

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Sky-Pilot's Shooting Chore



By **RALPH BERARD**

Ted Landstrom was a gun-fighter, working with the law; and it burned him up to see a parson try to work with tools that didn't belong to his trade!

DUST FILTERED up around the Cripple Range stage as it stopped in Silver City. Young Ted Landstrom, who had already established too much reputation with guns for his age, and who had been hired because of that to

guard a five-thousand-dollar gold shipment on the trip just completed, leaped down from his seat beside the driver. He twisted the handle of the stage door to let out the one passenger, then stepped back to lean against the wall of Jamie Guest's Wagon Spoke Saloon to watch the town welcome its new preacher.

Ted had learned on the trip that the man, who now stepped from the stage, called himself Reverend Oderley. He was tall, not quite middle-age, with aquiline features, and a not unfriendly smile. His frock was as black as mourning and his coat had long tails. He wore a low-crowned hat with a wandering brim which flapped in a uneven circle about his head. Rumor had it that Oderley was going to put an end to drinking in town and generally clean the place up. This amused Ted Landstrom. Anybody who stopped the drinking in Silver City would have to be quite a gent.

Jamie Guest, proprietor of the Wagon Spoke, came from inside and stood beside Ted. Jamie was a powerful man with a perpetual scowl on his face, from an old wound, and heavy guns on his hips. He observed the preacher and commented, "So that's the hombre who thinks he'll clean up this town." Jamie's tone was contemptuous.

"You can lend 'im a broom," Ted suggested. He felt just a trifle sorry for the preacher.

"I heard he was going to teach folks to let whiskey alone," Jamie continued in a softer drawl.

"And stop gunfights," Ted added.

The sky-pilot picked up his valise. Those who had come to welcome him, however, relieved him of this burden. They were mostly women. The way they fussed over the preacher left Ted with a feeling of disgust. He swung around through the batwing doors of Jamie's saloon and ordered a drink. Kim Lardo, the stage-driver, joined him there. Jamie personally shoved forward their glasses and said, "This is on the house. Drink to the new preacher."

Ted raised his glass with the driver. "To the new preacher." They drank.

Three weeks later a church had been built. Oderley stopped his open air preaching in front of the livery stable and announced regular Sunday services. Monday evening Ted was laying solitaire in Jamie's unusually deserted saloon when Frinky Stableboy came in.

Frinky was a skinny-faced kid with a twisted leg. He ran errands for anyone who offered a few pennies and now, advancing to Ted's table, he announced abruptly, "The preacher wants t' see ya."

Ted stared at Frinky incredulously. "The preacher wants to see me? Why?"

"Don't know. He just said t' come an' fetch ya."

"Suppose I don't fetch that easy?"

"Everybody fetches when the reverend says, 'Fetch,'" Frinky advised positively.

Jamie had stepped up to the table. As Ted rose the saloon owner queried with a touch of sarcasm. "You goin' to join the church?"

Ted was curious as to what the preacher could want with him. He was amused at the suspicion in Jamie's face, but he was also conscious that there was a serious side developing to this business and that, if he wasn't careful, he would be drawn into it. "You'll have to join the church," he grinned at Jamie, "if your business keeps dropping off."

Jamie scowled at him. It was true that Jamie's business was getting less and the saloon owner didn't think it was funny.

TED found Oderley studying under a green-shaded student lamp which sat on a rough home-made desk. "Sit down," the preacher greeted him pleasantly. "I want to have a little talk with you."

Ted sat down. He couldn't help being conscious of Oderley's unusually clear blue eyes. They seemed penetrating, as if they knew what a man was thinking. "Even as young as you are, you've killed men, haven't you, Landstrom?"

Ted felt anger building up in him. Even though the preacher's tone was not accusative, it was a pretty damn

delicate subject to approach that abruptly. "What if I have?" Ted demanded without apology.

"You had good reasons, I'm sure," Oderley said, "but the fact you were able to do it indicates you're the man I want to talk to."

Ted didn't understand what the preacher was getting at. This wasn't the approach he had expected. "I've worked with the sheriff," he said by way of explanation. "The men I've killed would have killed me if I hadn't killed them."

"I understand that," Oderley said. "The point I want to make is that you know about guns. That's what I'm interested in. Your friend, Mr. Jamie Guest already dislikes me. He seems to think I wish to run him out of business. I must have a talk with him about it."

Ted eyed the sky-pilot closely. "Sure, Jamie is mad about losing business. People are still drinking plenty but there's been enough falling off to take the cream off his profits."

"I suggested he might sell groceries and hardware with his liquor. The town will grow and Mr. Guest could make a great deal more money out of a general store. I have no objection to a reasonable amount of drinking but I'm against too much of it. Excessive drinking has evil effects."

Ted stood up. "If you want to run the town, it's your own lookout. Jamie is a friend of mine and it looks to me as though you're stirring up trouble in this town instead of preventing it." He turned toward the door.

Oderley rose quickly, came around his desk and intercepted Ted's departure by putting a gently restraining hand on his shoulder. "Could you get me a good gun? Would you sell me one of yours?"

Ted turned, studied the preacher's face for a long moment. It seemed almost as if Oderley were pleading with him for help. "Joe Davis sells guns in his store across the street. Nobody has enough money to buy one of mine. I'm used to them. When the sheriff needs an extra deputy he knows he can depend on

them." Ted paused, looked the preacher over closely again and felt a little sorry for him. "I wouldn't advise you getting a gun. They breed violence. You'd like as not get yourself killed."

Oderley smiled benignly. "It is at least pleasing to know you wish to give me advice which will protect my welfare," he said.

This was the last straw for Ted. "I'd say a preacher should know better than to fool with a gun," he snapped, then turned on his heel and went out.

* * *

Things got worse. It seemed to Ted that every time he went into the Wagon Spoke, he found Jamie's mood more sour. Friday night a bunch of riders came in from the Bar Q. Jake Ladsky, the Bar Q foreman, was a good friend of Jamie's. Ted sat at a rear table and watched Jamie set up a free round of drinks for the Bar Q boys while he talked to Ladsky.

"This preacher fellow," Jamie said, "is dryin' this town dryer'n the shed skin off a rattlesnake. If something ain't done there won't be a drink this side of Sage City." Jamie set the boys up another round of free drinks. They were becoming boisterous. It was plain that Jamie was building up sentiment against Oderley. Ted didn't want to get mixed up in it so he got up and went to his room in the hotel.

He was half undressed when shooting started on the street outside his window. He hurried into his clothes, strapped on his gunbelt and stuck his head carefully out the window.

The preacher was standing on the sidewalk. Half a dozen of the Bar Q bunch surrounded him with guns in their hands. They had guided Oderley to a spot under one of the outdoor hanging oil lamps and were hammering lead from their guns into the boards dangerously close to the preacher's toes.

While Ted watched, someone jerked off the preacher's hat. Jake Ladsky shouted, "This is a hint, Parson,

that leavin' town would be a powerful good thing fer the health."

Slow anger rose in Ted. This monkey business, with the men half drunk like they were, could result seriously. It was carrying things a little bit too far, he thought, but he couldn't make up his mind just what he should do. He was about ready to go down and take some sort of hand in the proceedings when the shooting suddenly stopped.

From the window Ted watched the Bar Q hands fade into the shadows. Oderley's friends, seeing the danger was over, came to comfort him. They stood, like a bunch of magpies, twittering and twattering on the sidewalk below his window, until Ted got disgusted and went to bed.

AS THE stage pulled in the next evening, Ted heard shooting again. He did his work hurriedly, then walked briskly toward the parsonage where slow firing was going on at regular intervals. A dozen persons were standing about. Ted elbowed his way among them.

The preacher was standing just beyond the curious by-standers. He held a big sixgun. There were three tin cans a few yards distant on a dry goods box. Oderley fired several times but none of the cans moved. He fired once more and all three cans jumped a little on the box. The preacher turned to those who watched with a pleased smile.

Ted turned away in disgust. The best Oderley had been able to do was hit the box beneath the cans.

Later, when Ted began thinking it over, it got to bothering him. The fool preacher was certainly heading up for trouble. Ted kept trying to tell himself he didn't give a darn about the preacher but the shooting scrapes weren't good for the town. The sky-pilot meant well likely. He just didn't understand a wild town like Silver City. Somebody had ought to tell him.

That evening Ted called on Oderley. "You're just hatching trouble," he said. "You've divided the town into two hostile camps. Sooner or later, it'll mean bloodshed."

Oderley looked incredulous. "Why should there be bloodshed? I shan't attack anyone. Why should anyone attack me?"

"You keep practicing with a gun," Ted reminded him. "It seemed to me like those Bar Q boys made things pretty warm for you."

"I want to be able to protect my rights," Oderley said. "I didn't like the way those cowpunchers treated me the other night, but I suppose I must learn to understand such things. They were just having fun, weren't they?"

Ted felt exasperated. There seemed no way to talk sense to this man. "You are going to get yourself killed," he warned bluntly. "You better get sense enough to realize that Jamie Guest is *not* having fun. You've hurt his business and he means to get rid of you." Ted spun around and hurried out. He was mad at the damn fool preacher for his foolishness and twice as mad at himself for meddling.

The next evening Sam Jensen, a traveling salesman from Sage City, came in on the stage. Ted had met Jensen several times and they went into the Wagon Spoke together. Jamie brought their drinks. Jensen grinned and said, "Heard you was thinking of putting in groceries and hardware."

Jamie didn't think it was funny. "Who in hell told you that?" he snorted angrily.

"It's just a rumor," Jensen laughed. The salesman kept his good humor but Jamie was mad. He told Jensen if he thought it was funny to get to hell out of his place and stay out. Jensen drained his glass, kept grinning and moved toward the door. "See you next trip, Jamie. I'll buy you a drink and maybe sell you a bill of goods."

Jamie grabbed the glass off the counter. He hurled it at the retreating salesman and it broke in a thousand pieces against the closing bathing door.

Ted tried to tell Jamie that Jensen had just been trying to be funny. Jamie saw no humor in the situation and he was still in an ugly humor

that night when the Bar Q boys came in. He started setting up free drinks and roiling the punchers up against the preacher. Ted went to his room again and during the night he heard shooting.

The next day was Sunday. Ted slept late. He awoke to hear Oderley preaching from a drygoods box he had set up in the main street outside Ted's window. Almost every person in town had gathered to listen. Ted opened his window and the preacher's words drifted up to him:

"Last night I was forced to lie on the floor in my home to avoid being killed. There were rough men outside shooting through the windows. They shot holes and broke most of the windows in the church."

Oderley cleared his throat. The crowd stirred uneasily, then became silent again. Oderley had drawn his big sixgun from the pocket of his black coat. It was evident he was about to make an important and far-reaching announcement. Someone raised a hand, demanding quiet. The whole town seemed hushed.

"This is the Sabbath," Oderley announced, "and I shall not seek an accounting today. There is no one, I am sure, who doubts who is to blame for the outrages which have been committed. Tomorrow evening I shall settle with Mr. Guest in the only way a man of his calibre can understand."

Oderley pocketed his gun and got down quietly off the box. The townspeople began whispering among themselves. Ted swore under his breath. He went down to where Jamie Guest had been listening to the Preacher's talk, leaning against the wall of his saloon. "What are you going to do, Jamie? You can't shoot down a preacher."

"He's the one seems anxious to do something," Jamie said. "What am I supposed to do, let him shoot me?"

Ted followed the saloon owner inside and watched Jamie pour himself a drink. Jamie didn't offer Ted one. It was pretty evident that nothing Ted could say would do any good. It looked like it would take more than words now to keep someone from getting killed.

TED didn't like the way things had gone. He went around thinking about it all day. It wasn't any of his business, he told himself. He would be a damn fool if he mixed up in it. Nevertheless, at eight o'clock that night, when the preacher walked into the Wagon Spoke, Ted was sitting at a front table.

There had been quite a crowd there for an hour. The town had been buzzing with rumors. Even Jensen, the salesman, had got hold of them somehow and circled back. He sat at the same table opposite Ted and Jamie had seemed too pre-occupied to think of chasing him out.

The preacher stood inside the batwings a long minute just looking things over. A complete silence fell. Oderley kept his right hand in the big pocket of his black coat. Everyone could see the shape of his gun bulging against the cloth. He was wearing no hat. Ted thought he looked younger and taller without it, then he wondered what in hell made him think of a thing like that at a time like this.

Ted maneuvered his chair forward a trifle. He braced his feet so he could leap up quickly. His hand was ready to go for his gun but he hadn't yet made up his mind what he meant to do. Nothing he could think of seemed to make sense.

Jamie came forward along the bar. "Come in to have a drink, Preacher?" The saloon owner's tone was like frozen syrup.

"Mr. Guest," Oderley said in a firm tone, "You've been attacking me in a cowardly way. When I realized my work was hurting your business, I came and talked to you. I suggested you might sell groceries and hardware. But when you chose to attack me, you seemed afraid to come yourself. You sent drunken ruffians."

Ted rose slowly to his feet, his hand near his gun. He still didn't know what he intended to do. He had nothing against the preacher. Jamie had always been his friend. But now, they were both acting like fools.

Oderley continued, "I came tonight to straighten things out in the only

way you would understand. I intend to use a gun."

The length of Oderley's talk began telling on Guest. He wet his lips and frowned. The silence in the place became oppressive. The lowest words could be heard in the furthest corner. "This ain't no time for sermons, Preacher," Guest said. "State your business. Let's get it over."

Oderley turned so he wasn't looking at Jamie Guest directly. He took the big gun from his pocket. Guest let his hand go to his gun handle, but didn't draw. The way Oderley was looking across the bar confused him.

Oderley fired. Jamie Guest never lifted his weapon from leather. He heard the tinkle and clatter of breaking glass and turned toward his liquor shelves. Oderley's eyes were focused on the long rows of bottles behind Jamie's bar. The sights of his weapon lined the bottles in row. The breaking of tension caused such relaxation of taught nerves that someone laughed.

Oderley kept firing. Before each new shot, he carefully shifted the muzzle of his gun to bear on a lower shelf. Once Jamie's hand started again for his holster but the laughing was increasing and at that moment Ted Landstrom slapped Jamie on the shoulder and said, "After all, Jamie, turn about is fair play. You was responsible for making him dance on the sidewalk and shooting out his windows."

Again Jamie's hand moved toward his holster. At that second Oderley's

gun cracked again. There was a new tinkle of glass. A liquor bottle glugged boisterously trying to empty all at once through its broken neck. The preacher turned and strode out.

Jensen now stood beside Ted. "What you need is a good line of groceries and some hardware."

Ladsky stepped forward and yelled for all the boys from the Bar Q to have a drink. "Never did see liquor flow so free as it's doin' here t'night." Turning to Jamie, he said more seriously, "Why don't you put in some hardware? The way things is I got t' send a man clean to Sage City every time we need a roll o' barb wire."

Half an hour later, after a few drinks all around, Ladsky was giving Jamie a detailed order for an extra large lot of hardware and more than a thousand dollars worth of supplies for the fall round-up chuck-wagons. When Ted finally decided to leave, Jensen was buying drinks for the house and Jamie was signing the biggest order the salesman had ever taken back to his wholesale house.

Ted went to his room. As he kicked his boots under the bed, he laughed to himself and said aloud, "I've seen things settled with guns a right good many times; I've settled 'em that way myself on occasion but, by gad, a man's never too young to learn. Damned if I ever seen a mess turn out like this before."

He was still chuckling to himself when he fell asleep.

(THE END)

COMING NEXT ISSUE

GUNS OF THE NESTER CLAN

Complete Novelette

By LEE FLOREN

Showdown



By GUNNISON STEELE

It didn't seem possible that Sid Jarret would be able to beat Tuck's four kings—but whether Jarret could or not, Tuck had still lost too much to be able to cover Jarret's bets.

"I'M LETTIN' you down easy this time, Tuck," Sid Jarret said, grinning that sly, wicked grin as he shoved more money into the pot. "I'm raisin' you just a hundred!"

I felt kind of cold inside. I was already eight hundred loser in this draw poker game—eight hundred of the two thousand dollars I'd got for the cattle I'd shipped that morning, money I couldn't afford to lose.

There'd been a couple of others in the game when it started, but now it had narrowed down to just Sid Jarret and me.

I looked across at Jarret. He was a big, dark man with flabby jowls and cold little eyes. He owned the Fry-ing Pan outfit—land he'd won at crooked poker, I'd heard—but he never pretended to do any work. His hands were soft and smooth. If I hadn't got a couple of drinks under

my belt I'd have had more sense than to sit down with him. But now it was done, and I had to try to get back that eight hundred.

I peeked again at my three jacks, a fair hand in any poker game. Jarret had drawn three cards.

"Call," I said, shoved in a hundred and flipped my cards.

Jarret spread his hand face up. He had three kings.

"Too bad, kid," he sneered, raking in the pot.

If he was cheating, I hadn't been able to catch him. Maybe a dozen men were gathered about the table, sweating the game, but the room was pretty quiet. They knew as well as I did that I couldn't afford to lose that money. They must have figured I was pretty dumb—a freckled, red-haired button of twenty settin' down with a poker wolf like Sid Jarret. But I was too stubborn to back down now.

I wanted to slam my fist into Jarret's grinning face. Instead, I said, "Yore deal—and yuh better deal 'em straight!"

His black eyes narrowed down. "What you mean by-that, kid?"

"Just deal 'em," I said.

He dealt, and he won that pot, too. Pretty soon I was a thousand loser. That cold feeling was still in my stomach. If I went broke it meant more than just losing my money. It meant that likely Rose Tully wouldn't ever marry me. I'd never seen a prettier girl than Rose. She'd promised to marry me next month. But she wouldn't marry anybody who'd been dumb enough to lose two thousand dollars in cow money.

JARRET kept on winning. Half a dozen times he just barely topped me. Seemed like he could read the backs of the cards.

Once Jim Sabin, who owned the saloon we were playing in, tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Don't you reckon you had enough, kid? You're outa yore class—"

"Let the kid alone," Sid Jarret said coldly. "It's his money, ain't it?"

"It sure is," I said. "My luck'll change!"

But it didn't, and pretty soon I was fifteen hundred loser. I knew then that I didn't have a chance, but I wouldn't quit.

"Mind if I take a hand, gentlemen?"

I looked up quick. A runty, pale-eyed little old gent stood there beside the table. He had a neatly trimmed spade beard that had gray in it. He wore a black suit with a black string tie and a white shirt. I hadn't noticed him standing there watching the game, but I knew he must have been there behind me several minutes.

Nick Hawn owned the 77 outfit over along French Creek. I reckon he had more friends than any man on the Kettledrum range. Once he'd been a gambler—a square gambler, I'd heard, and folks called him "Two-Card" Hawn—but he never played now except for low stakes with a few old cronies. He'd never more than spoken to me a few times.

Now Sid Jarret's agate eyes narrowed thoughtfully on Nick Hawn. He knew Hawn had once been a gambler, but he must have figured the oldtimer was out of practice and would be easy pickings.

"Your money's good as any, old man," Jarret said. "No limit, no table stakes—play all yuh got, can beg, borrow or steal!"

Nick Hawn nodded curtly and sat down. He took a roll of money from his pocket and placed it on the table before him.

The game started up again. I didn't see how Nick Hawn being in the game would help me. Likely it would just mean more easy money for Sid Jarret.

I won the first pot, a small one, and Jarret won the next three. Jarret was grinning that cold, sly grin. Nick Hawn didn't seem to care much whether he won or lost. He played carefully, watching Jarret with his pale, wise old eyes. I could see he was feeling Jarret out, like a man feels out a gent he's fighting before leaping in for the kill.

Still, that wasn't helping me. I was down to my last two hundred. I

could see a year's work—and a slender, yellow-haired girl named Rose—slipping away from me.

Nick Hawn won a couple of good pots off Jarret—and now Jarret had stopped grinning. He dealt more slowly, and there was a puzzled, uncertain light in his eyes.

Before starting this deal—the deal where I caught four kings cold—I saw Jarret look at me, then at Nick Hawn, before a kind of hood dropped over his black eyes. My heart jumped up and hit me under the chin when I saw the four kings. Then it dropped back with a thud.

Even if I got a play on the kings, I didn't have enough money to get back but a tiny part of what I'd lost.

I LOOKED at Jarret and Nick Hawn. Jarret was frowning, peering at his cards. Hawn's gray face was expressionless. He seemed kind of bored.

It was my first bet. I didn't want to give my hand away by betting too much, so I shoved in fifty dollars. Nick Hawn shrugged, tossed in his hand. Jarret peered at his cards again, then very carefully placed them on the table face-down.

"Tuck," he said, "I'm tired of playin' poker for today. I'll just raise the rest yuh got!"

I counted out my last hundred and fifty, cussin' the black luck that had given me four king cards and no money to back 'em up with.

"That's all the money I got, tinhorn—which is a lucky thing for you!" I said.

"Good hand, eh?" Jarret purred.

"Good enough to back up, if I had more money—"

"You got some land, ain't you?"

"Yeah, I got some land—"

"But no nerve, huh, kid?"

"Why, cuss dang yore mangy hide!" I yelled, rearin' up. "Get on yore feet and I'll show yuh who's got nerve!"

"I didn't mean that kind of nerve," Jarret said, his eyes cold and merciless. "Remember, we ain't playin' table stakes. Yore little cow outfit ain't worth much, but it's worth something. Put it in the pot—or toss in your hand and give me the pot!"

I sat back down. I felt kind of pale inside. I'd worked hard to build up my little place on Hungry Creek. It was all I had. If I lost it, along with the money that was already gone, I'd be laughed out of the country.

Everybody was looking at me. They knew Jarret had me where the hair was short. Nick Hawn was lighting a cigar, staring at me over the match.

Those five cards—the four kings and a trey—seemed big as a barn in my hand. Not once in a million times would a man draw a hand that would beat four kings.

"Reckon that busts up the game," Jarret said, reaching for the pot. "Tough luck, kid—"

"Just a minute, tinhorn!" I said. "Don't get any grease on yore fingers off that pot. I'm callin' yore bluff. My outfit ought to be worth four thousand, hadn't it?"

Jarret settled back. I could see his eyes narrowing down warily as he looked at me. Then he grinned thinly.

"So you decided to ride that hand after all, huh?" he sneered. "Well, to me yore land's worth just two thousand. I'll put up the two thousand—you write out a bill of sale for yore land. We'll put it all in this one pot. Take it or leave it!"

"I took it. Sid Jarret counted out two thousand in cash. Jim Sabin brought pen and paper, and I wrote out a bill of sale in Jarret's name for my outfit. Those four kings looked bigger and bigger all the time. I felt pretty good.

Nick Hawn hadn't said a word. He just sat there, watching Jarret more than he did me through his cigar smoke.

NOW, as I started to shove the paper into the pot, he spoke up sharply: "Just a minute, there, Tuck Boone! I'm makin' you a little loan!"

The room got mighty quiet. Sid Jarret leaned forward, quick suspicion on his thin features.

"You're *what*?" he demanded flatly.

"Why, makin' the button a little loan," Nick Hawn said calmly, and

took a money belt from about his waist. "You might call it a kind of investment, in that hand of his. I believe he's got yuh beat! Anything wrong in that?"

Jarret licked his lips, but said nothing. He watched with a kind of desperate fury in his eyes as Hawn started countin' out big bills from the money belt. I felt like a mule had kicked me in the stomach as the stack before me kept buildin'.

"There's fifteen thousand, kid," Nick Hawn said. "Use yore own judgment—and pay me back when you get ready. I got confidence in you."

"And I got confidence in this poker hand," I said. "I'm seein' yore two thousand, Jarret—and raisin' yuh the fifteen!"

I never saw a man turn paler than Sid Jarret did. He seemed to have forgotten me. He was staring at Nick Hawn, that desperate uncertainty in his eyes—and Nick Hawn stared back, smiling a little, contempt plain in his pale eyes. Jarret wet his lips.

"I ain't got that much money," he muttered.

"You got land," I said. "But no nerve, huh, Jarret?"

"I ain't takin' a chance on my land!" he said harshly.

He ripped his five cards in half. Then he got up and stalked out of Jim Sabin's saloon without looking back.

"He was bluffin' all the way," I said, grinning. "He knew I had 'im topped. There's yore fifteen thousand, Mister Hawn—with interest."

"Just the loan, Tuck." Nick Hawn looked kind of sad as he put the money back into his money belt.

"I get my interest in knowin' I helped a young gent who's about to marry a yellow-haired girl out of a bad jam."

"Jam? I already had my money won back with these four kings. Nothin' but four aces—or a straight flush—beats 'em!"

And I spread my poker hand face up.

NICK HAWN didn't even look at the cards.

"Even before I started playin'," he said, strapping the money belt back about his thin waist, "I knew Sid Jarret had thumbnail marked every card in the deck. You couldn't feel the marks, Tuck, because yore hands are tough from handling a rope and posthole digger and such like. But Jarret's soft hands could feel 'em, and so could mine. So I kind of messed up his marks, and added a few of my own. That made Jarret lose confidence in his own cards."

"You mean that skunk was playin' crooked cards on me?"

Nick Hawn nodded.

"When he dealt you that last cold hand, he was sure he had you beat. Then, when I loaned you the fifteen thousand to raise with, he wasn't sure. He got scared he'd read the marks wrong, and turned yellow."

"He knew I had him beat!" I grinned. "That's one time a tinhorn showed good sense, anyhow!"

"And one time you didn't," Nick Hawn said gently.

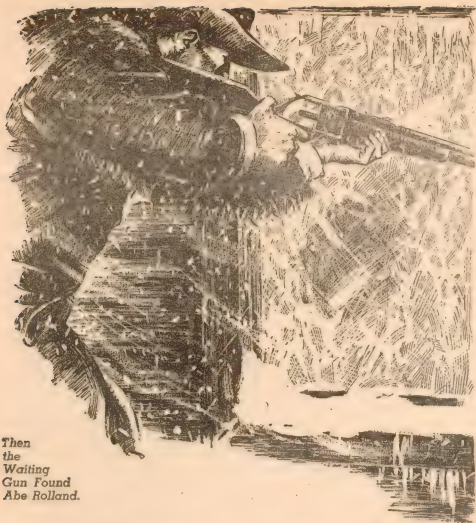
Slowly he turned over the four aces and a ten that Sid Jarret had torn in half and slammed face-down on the table. Then he turned and walked out into the sunshine.

(THE END)

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE FROM BOSTON TO BOOTHILL

COMPLETE NOVELETTE

By RICHARD BRISTER



Then
the
Waiting
Gun Found
Abe Rolland.

Killers Also Die

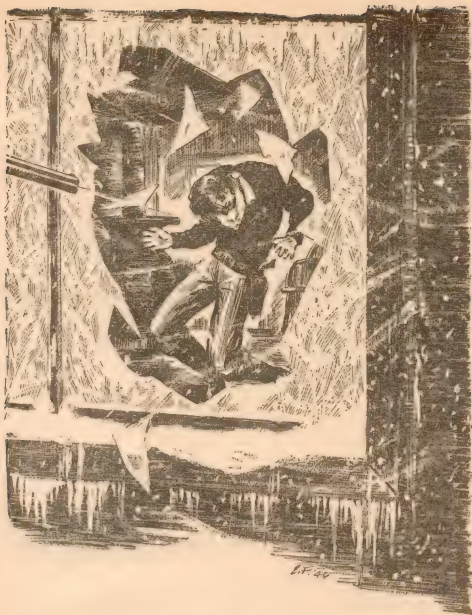
COMPLETE NOVELET

By SEYMOUR IRVING RICHIN

Alamo Jones had come through the war between the states, sick of humanity. What was the use of killing yourself for people capable of what he'd seen on battlefields? Then, as he watched Virginia City respond to one man's funeral.

NEITHER of the two men in Abe Rolland's Virginia City Mining Tool Store saw the Winchester .30-.30 steal cautiously against the snow-blurred window, weave in the wild-blowing wind, and level.

Inside, Abe Rolland paced the floor, dividing worried glances between the door and Alamo Jones.



who lay upon a cot against a corner wall, his Union Army Cavalry Officer's uniform covered by a red Piute blanket. Alamo's long body was curiously still. There was a hard, deep silence about this man who had seen war; it was in his big, quiet hands folded motionlessly on his chest, in the graven impassivity

of his face. Mostly, it was in his eyes; they were a clear, sensitive gray, but you did not see their color right away. You felt the numb despair of this man at first glance. His eyes were blank, lost.

For three days he'd lain this way, ever since Rolland and his daughter, Eve, had picked him up, insensibly

drunk and half dead from exposure outside the Sawdust Corner on C Street. In three days he'd made only one comment: "The both of you be damned. Can't a man die in peace?"

The mountain air was torn with man sounds. This was the Washoe of '66 and no longer did the savage winds command the slag and ash of Mount Davidson's eight-thousand-foot peak. Men had come; miners were hacking the earth for silver. Booming through the white-black night, above the frozen cry of the wind, came the scream of whistles, the endless pound of stamps and arastars, and the great, shuddering dynamite blasts from the mine shafts. And over it all, slicing fitfully at the machine's roar, the wind howled, lost and lonely and sad.

"I wish Eve was back from Frank Ives' newspaper office, Alamo," said Rolland nervously. "Somethin' troublin' her; somethin' powerful bad." He moved abruptly past the snow-filmed window. The movement saved his life; his stride carried him out of range of the leveling gun-bore. He studied the heavy, scarred church bell which towered over a scattering of long Toms, near his stove. "Queer," he muttered. "Preacher Kirk's bell can kill a man, Eve said. That's all she said after she got his letter. Then off she rode for Frank Ives' like a bat outta hell." He shook his head. "Matt Greer and his two brothers must be behind this; those damned Sheriff-killers got their guns behind everythin' that's rotten in the Washoe."

ALAMO JONES made no comment; no flicker of interest or emotion stirred his blond, strong-boned features. And that was strange, thought Rolland. Before the war, Alamo Jones would have been intensely interested in his remarks, he knew; in anything that suggested lawlessness, especially where Eve was concerned. To this man, Jones, whose father had died in the great American battle for which he'd been nicknamed, there had always been something magnificent about the American frontier, something worth defending. He'd caught the feeling

from its people, the many kinds of people, Protestant, Catholic and Jew; people of all colors and from all nations; all bent on casting this wild land into a shape as yet unknown on earth—democracy.

"Some folks figure bein' free gives 'em the right to kick in the head of their neighbor," Alamo had told Rolland the day he'd chosen a lawman's career. "I aim to show these free-shootin' hombres what my Dad gave his life for."

He had—in a way the woolly Washoe could understand. There'd been no jail in Sheriff Alamo Jones' bailiwick. He'd torn it down and had a hospital erected in its place, with a sign on the building reading: **FREE TREATMENT FOR LAW-BREAKERS!** And within sight of the hospital was the dueling ground he'd cleared on the mountainside.

"Choose your weapons and duel me before the whole Washoe!" was his challenge to the desperado element, "or choose another territory to live in!"

It was not long before the battles fought on Alamo Jones' dueling ground made his name as famous in the Washoe as Wild Bill Hickok's name was in Abilene.

Training constantly for his career, Alamo collected small arms of all kinds, from ancient fifteenth century flintlocks and daggers to modern Colts and Bowies. Each new weapon he acquired was quickly mastered.

It was little wonder that new weapons were added to his collection, after his duels. One wall of Alamo's office was reserved for the guns and knives of the men he'd vanquished. But, although his collection had always been a passion with him, Alamo hadn't looked at them since his return from the war.

"DAMNED if I can make you out these days, Alamo," Rolland said, probing at this man's silence again. "Damned if any of your old Washoe friends can." His voice thickened. "Even Eve, I reckon, though you two were mighty close—once." Then, "You ain't so much as said howdy to anybody. Just bucked the tiger night after

night at the Sawdust corner till you got more rotgut in your veins than blood. Seems you don't like people no more."

"I don't," Alamo snapped. His remark came like a pistol shot.

"Eh?" Rolland jumped, one eyelid creeping down a fraction of an inch. Alamo's big, quiet hand leaped alive on the blanket, coiling and uncoiling.

"People," he muttered and he grimaced. *People*. He'd seen the people in action. He'd seen them hack the lives out of each other by the hundreds of thousands and their presence had seemed a loathsome stain on the good earth. "Human beings ain't so human," he said. "I've seen battlefields; I know."

Rolland's glance was thoughtful. He was glad this troubled man's silence was over. You couldn't reason with silence. He said, "Lincoln was one of the people, too; keep that in your head."

Alamo Jones said nothing. He closed his eyes and turned his face to the wall. Rolland scowled and resumed his nervous pacing, moving past the window again.

Beyond the frosted glass, the quivering gunbore lined on his broad back. A snow flurry gusted against the pane, obscuring visibility. The gunbore weaved again, impatience and anger behind the shifting black shadow of the rifle—and a terrible eagerness for accuracy. The snow flurry thickened, so heavily white it all but cut off the color of the night. The rifle's weaving became violent. Then the shifting black shadow shot suddenly downward, vanishing below the sill as Rolland turned.

He angled a glance through the churning snowflakes, searching for Eve. His heavy hand reached the pane and wiped a loophole in the smoky glass for better seeing. Close as he was, he did not look down; he had no reason to. He did not dream the man lived who would put lead in his back.

He frowned; not a sign of her. Nothing out there but the wind and snow tearing around like all thunder. Remembering the renewal of Alamo's silence, he was doubly disturbed, but

he did not probe into this man again. He thought of Eve and stared straight at a spot in the night where the wall of false fronts and the wheel-torn road blended and thinned into the foggy sweep of Mount Davidson. Still, he did not look down.

A GENIAL, stocky man, Rolland had a heart as big as a saddle blanket. If a Washoe miner was broke, or without shelter, or needed to get the wrinkles out of his belly, he knew where to go—to Abe Rolland. That was the way he was and the Washoe knew him and his friends were legion. It was no wonder the Virginia City miners said, "Gold's plain dirt beside him." No wonder either that Rolland never dreamed he would be murdered.

The sameness of the white, rushing wind baffled him. He kept staring out, blindly though, staring into his mind.

Eve knew the Greer brothers had wiped out the law in the Washoe. Terror rodged this mining town. Why go to Frank Ives? He was a tough newspaperman, sure, and he fought the Greers every day through his paper; but everybody knew even Ives was helpless. And what kind of a tight was she in, anyway? What harm could there be in Preacher Kirk's old church bell?

The church bell. Rolland spun suddenly around, thought a spur in him, bringing the flat of his broad back against the pane. The bush-whack gun stayed below the window. There were only the snowflakes dying on the glass. The bell's wide mouth was pressed against the floor planks like an overturned cup. Rolland walked slowly around it, not touching it, just staring at it inch by inch. Queer, he thought; he'd passed it by casually any number of times since Preacher Kirk had left it in his care three months before, after a Washoe hurricane had destroyed his wooden church.

"All I could save from the ruins was my belt," the Preacher had told Rolland. "I must stage out for Placerville and order stone and iron for a new church. Eve and you have been my favorites here. Will you

take care of my bell while I'm gone?"

"We sure will."

Now, Rolland ran one hand wonderingly along the bell's scaly, iron surface. "Kill a man," he muttered aloud, remembering Eve's comment. "A church bell, eh?" At that, Alamo Jones stirred on his cot and glanced at him.

He shouted, "The window! Watch out, Rolland!" And in one fluid motion, he flung off the blanket, leaped erect and slanted one big-boned hand for his black-barreled Colt, hanging from his gunbelt on a nearby wall peg.

The shifting black shadow beyond the window changed color. Flame jetted from the bore and smashed a hole through the glass, filling the room with its roar. Blending with the rifle's report came the magnified scream of the wind.

The bullet drove into Rolland's back. He staggered, his legs going rubbery. He said, "Gawd," in a very low whisper. The bullet was killing him; he knew it was killing him.

He whispered again and he was not using his Lord's name in vain; he needed his Lord then. His face changed, strangely. He frowned, staying on his feet by a remarkable effort, trying to see the face of the man who'd shot him, but he couldn't; he was suddenly too full of darkness. The last thing he felt was the keen, alive touch of the wind and he thought how he hated to die. Then the rushing, buoyant darkness swept him away and he crumpled.

Again the rifle's roar pounded its smashing echoes at the walls.

A hard, black silence hit Alamo Jones even as he ran, stopped him and plucked him up in a tight arc from head to toe, like a drawn bow. He got within arm's length of his Colt, then his hand fell away. The room vanished and his feeling of himself and the chill of the white, stinging wind. There was only darkness and pain. He felt agony burn against his skull, then the heat and sear of it ebbed and the world became a wash of undulating shadows. He fell and fell and fell into their deeps, sinking endlessly. He thought he would never stop falling. Then the hard, black silence was complete.

CONSCIOUSNESS sprayed its slow light wanly through the shadows in his brain. Awake and stirring, he saw at once that he was back on the cot. He swallowed. His head throbbed. His mouth tasted like sand. He shook his head and brought his finger tips wonderingly against the heavy bandage there. He noticed, too, that the church bell was gone. Then the sight of Rolland's body, sprawled in awful silence on the floor, drove all else from his mind.

Again, he muttered with bitterness, "Human beings ain't so human."

He saw Eve suddenly. She was standing beside Frank Ives, the newspaperman she had gone to see after reading Preacher Kirk's letter. The letter was clenched in her right hand. There was tension and dignity and a great anger in the faintly too-erect posture of this slim, dark-haired girl. She was staring down at her father's body, her back to Alamo. He was glad he could not see her eyes.

"That letter's dynamite, Miss Eve," he heard Ives say hoarsely. An ex-Senator turned newspaperman, Frank Ives' blistering articles against the Greer brothers in the *Territorial Enterprise* had been for months the conscience of the Washoe. He was tall and lean-faced and his bright blue eyes had never shown fear. They were showing it now. "Matt Greer and his two brothers won't dare bush-whack me. They're plenty afraid of my backers in Washington. But they'll know about that letter; they'll know you're wise to the secret of the church bell. You're in danger, Eve—"

Eve said with a certain emphasis, "I'm not afraid of the Greer brothers. My father left no money, but I do have friends—"

"Friends? The only valuable friend you might have is the man whose head wound you just bandaged. If he was still the man he used to be." Without turning, Ives waved a hand at Alamo's cot. "The Greers have buffaloe every other livin' son in the Washoe. Ask me; I've pinned a Sheriff's star on eight men in three months and they've all been bush-whacked like your Dad. Murdered in cold blood by the Greers. And now there are no more takers; we're buckin' pure terror."

Then a respectful gleam came into Ives' blue eyes. "Beats hell how many men admired your Dad, though," he said. "Looks like the whole Washoe left the mines when they heard old Abe Rolland cashed in his chips. Thousands of them are standin' outside, waitin' to pay their last respects, and it's colder'n hell on a stoker's holiday."

"I know," Eve whispered. Her voice caught. "I've seen them."

"Want me to let them in now?"

She nodded. "Dad would like that."

FROM his cot, Alamo Jones watched the procession, his mind fully cleared. One by one, the miners filed in, snow dripping from their boots and mackinaws, their faces working from the cold. Silence flowed through the room and the cautious movements of the men were pieces of it. Alamo propped himself up on his elbows, then came all the way up, watching. His eyes flashed.

He caught the emotion of these men, felt it in many ways; it was in the quiet, tender pressure these rough miners gave Rolland's hand, in the way they stood over him, hunched and grim-faced, just staring, just saying they wished this did not have to be. There was a kind of beauty here, he knew; the feeling pierced his hard shell of bitterness and dissolved it then as the day dissolves the night. Something the war had nearly slain came alive and flamed and warmed his heart.

He arose; he moved past Eve, feeling her presence touch him, and made himself go on without a word. The mass of people beyond the shattered window put an alert speed to his step.

He stared out at them, caught his breath, trembling. The foamy night was black with them. They stood, by the thousand, a solid black bulk against the white sweep of the mountain road. Freezing snow waves were lashing them like whips, but they were silent, these people, silent and motionless and their silence was an enormous thing. Alamo went on tip-toe.

The mass seemed like one organism, connected and driven by the

same nervous system, only their breathing gave each man identity. Jets of vapor rose skyward in a thousand gusts, lifting like steam from the black bulk. The steam jets shivered in the icy air, living and dying in a split second. They were blown to nothingness by the wind's fury. But the biting cold could not break the solidity of the black mass. These men had come for a purpose; these men would accomplish that purpose.

"Look out there, Eve!" Alamo whirled, a thrill leaping through him. "Just look out there!"

"I know," she said, and he thought how good it was to hear the gentleness in her voice. He glanced deeply at her with an interest that was somehow new. They both felt it; they both felt the thread of their lives connect and lift and again move forward.

Alamo said with a sudden sharpness, "I was a fool."

"No, you were only human." She moved away from the procession of miners, anguish still in the barely perceptible trembling of her long, graceful hands. Her dark brown eyes met his openly. She would always meet his glance openly. She loved this man; it was a condition that death alone could change. His silence had hurt her, and his bitterness, but the hurt had been the less for her understanding. From the beginning, she had known the war had done this to her, and not the man. Now, seeing his face change, and hearing the old, alive call of his voice, she felt gladness rush through her, even at this moment. He had seen people in a new light; he would never be troubled again.

"I'm sorry, Eve. I don't know how to say it. Not only about your Dad. About us—"

"It couldn't be helped," she said. Winter still had its white, vigorous print on her. In her raven-black hair snowflakes glistened and her cheeks were fresh and healthy with color. "You were—sick."

"Yeah, I was sick," Alamo muttered. He shrugged and blinked and moved his face muscles like a man just awakening from a dream. He

felt weak. Weakness was a sluggish flow through him now that he was off the cot, and his head ached. *More rotgut in his veins than blood.* Roland had been right. Lord, but he'd poured his strength down the bottle.

"Yeah, I was sick," he repeated, and he said nothing more, but his mind was active. When the procession of miners finally ended and the slain man was at last gone forever from the room, Alamo moved to Eve and Frank Ives, who had remained to comfort the girl. The letter was still in Eve's hand.

"I'll take that." Alamo touched the letter with the finger tips of one hand.

Eve breathed sharply. Ives read Alamo's face and his eyes glinted. "We've got our lawman back," he said quietly. "Give it to him, Miss Eve."

Eve gave it to him. Fear was in her for this man she loved, for she knew the letter's contents; but the frontier was in her, too, and danger did not make her weak. "Yes, we have him back."

Alamo pressed her hand, then read Preacher Kirk's letter intently.

Dear Eve,

You and your father are in terrible danger. So is anybody who comes in contact with the church bell I left in your charge.

The bell is not the innocent relic I thought then. I learned its true history from my superiors here in Placerville. Also, the murderous plans of the Greer brothers.

The bell was specially cast by Emperor Maximilian after the successful Mexican revolution, headed by Benito Juarez. Before fleeing the country, Maximilian was concerned with evacuating his royal fortune out of Mexico to Galveston for shipment back to Austria.

Protected by a picked guard, he sent a caravan of wagons, loaded with bullion and precious jewels, into Texas. At Castle Gap, fifteen miles east of Horsehead Crossing, the caravan was attacked by six ex-Confederate

soldiers and the guard murdered.

Soon after cacheing the loot, five of the six murderers were killed by Indians near Fort Concho, and the sixth died of illness, leaving a complete deathbed confession. However, despite the directions he left, Maximilian's gold has never been recovered.

Nor have his crown jewels, which Maximilian cleverly concealed, after learning of the Castle Gap disaster. He had three identical church bells cast, and hid these gems, packaged tightly, in a hollow specially carved in the crown of one. The idea of identical church bells was designed to fool even those who worked on them and knew his plans.

However, before Maximilian could smuggle the bells out of Mexico, he was caught by Juarez' men at Queretaro and executed by a firing squad. The three bells were then unknowingly sold by the Mexican government to American churches. Their secret would never be known if Maximilian's private diary had not been smuggled across the Mexican border, and since published by his friends.

Only one of the three church bells has been recovered, and that found to be worthless. The one in your charge may have Maximilian's crown jewels. Guard it well. The Greers know its value; they tortured the information out of Placerville's minister before taking the trail to the Washoe. That's why they're there. Go to Frank Ives and use his newspaper to fight for the return of law and order. I am leaving at once to help.

*God bless you,
Preacher Kirk.*

A muscle in Alamo's jaw throbbed. He said, "Ahh," softly. Then, with swift, decisive movements, he tore the letter to shreds, strode to the black-bellied stove, jarred it open and flung the pieces into its hot, yellow mouth.

A church bell can kill a man. He

thought of Rolland's bewilderment and scowled. In his mind was the murderous black shadow at the window and the flash of gunflame that had sent Rolland into the ground and his scowl deepened.

"Maybe those Greers'll find out that killers also die," he said. He released his gunbelt from the wall peg, buckled it around his waist and tested the holster. "You got that tin badge you were talkin' about, Ives?"

Ives nodded and pinned the star on Alamo's chest with alacrity. His breath came fast. He stared at Alamo.

"Tell the Greers I'm comin' for them." Amazing, Alamo thought, how lightly he said that.

IVES' heels lifted a full three inches off the ground, involuntarily. "No dueling ground?" He added that he'd taken care of both the dueling ground, and Alamo's empty hospital building, while he'd been at the front.

"No dueling ground. No hospital treatment, either, for those backshootin' snakes." Again, a small muscle along Alamo's jaw throbbed. "... If my gun has the last word in this argument. Tell them that. Tell the whole Washoe that. Tell the Greers to meet me on the road with their hands filled."

A shudder of pure joy went through Ives. He wheeled and strode rapidly out the door.

"Alamo." Everything Eve felt was in the quick, short way she spoke his name. She let him see nothing of her anguish, not in words. Words, she knew, were futile now. This man would not be stopped by words.

"It's got to be," Alamo said. He drew her close and stared into the heart of her dark brown eyes and her heart was there to see. He held her this way and let their glances meet and blend and touch one another for a while. Then he repeated, somewhat hoarsely, "It's got to be," and moved to the door, away from the contact of her eyes. He felt he had never done anything harder.

white of C street as Alamo strode down the road, his body tilted and stiffened against the screaming wind. The snowfall was almost a solid wall of white. Booming dynamite blasts from the mine shafts shuddered the earth and the grinding stamps beat their echoes steadily into the night. A reeking emanation from Virginia City's Chinese Quarter drifted in the icy air, a mixture of the smells of tea, spice and orange peel and the sweet, sickening odor of red poppies.

There was a strange, dead silence and no shapes of people outlined themselves in the snow-wall. Alamo read the silence of this town swiftly, and he felt the flesh of his back and chest thicken and become something hard and shell-like around him, as though a bushwhack rifle was sighting on him.

Fear had built this silence. The Greers were somewhere on the road. Somewhere behind the wall of white. Ives, he thought grimly, you spread the word well.

Then Alamo's flesh no longer was a vise around him.

This would be no bushwhack murder. The eyes of the whole Washoe were behind this silence, too. Not even the Greers could pull a bushwhack sandy now.

His long, strong fingers dipped sharply, deeply to the right when he heard the shift of boots in the snow. His Colt flashed up. He saw the black eye of a rifle bore slant at him through the careening furies and instantly, he shot.

The rifle bore dipped, then spun high into the flaky air and fell soundlessly.

His clothing caked with snow; he gazed up at Alamo, pure terror in his scream. He was shot under the heart. A red stain was changing the color of his clothes, and he tried to wipe it away with big, stiff hands. He fell, his body a twisting S on the ground, and snow foamed up around him. He screamed in long, awful agonies of sound. He screamed that he was dying, he was dying. . . .

Alamo winced, then pity fled from his mind as he heard the dangerous sound of running, pounding boots.

(Continued On Page 79)

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Killers Also Die

(Continued From Page 77)

"Rush me, eh?" he muttered. Stampede me, eh?" He flung himself on his belly like a sharpshooting rifleman behind a log. "Not me. No, you don't." And he waited for the sounds to bring them. He fought off a sudden drag of weakness with difficulty.

The two Greer brothers burst hugely through the snow waves, several yards apart, their Colts winking flame. They were surprised, Alamo knew, from their fire. They had expected a man on his feet. He grinned, hearing the pulsing moan of bullets over his head.

He saw a heavy, sweaty face with wide, staring eyes float over him and he drove three bullets carefully into it. The face broke and crimson wiped its shape and identity away. The second Greer took a short, high leap and a strange energy drove his body through the air in a flat dive. He died before he reached the earth again. His body vanished utterly into a deep, snow-filled prospect hole.

ALAMO was remotely amazed at the absence of gunfire. Scream after scream from the dying man drove all sound from the night.

"Damn you! Damn you!" he heard a man shout, then he saw a flying Colt drive blackly down at him through the woolly wind. Following it on the run, his huge chest heaving, was Matt Greer, his thick-jawed face full of hate. "Damn you! Damn you!"

Alamo shifted, too late. The spinning Colt smashed into his ribs, driving a wire of pain through him, tearing a great piece out of his ebbing strength. He rolled in the snow. He won a battle for breath and somehow got to one knee.

"Back up, you." Through pain-whitened lips, he tilted his gun up at Matt Greer who stood, shuddering, over him, one massive boot lifted high, ready to pound his brains out into the snow. The massive boot hung there a second, then came down slowly, delicately and rested beside its mate.

"Damn you. Damn you." He said it

(Continued On Page 80)

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(Continued From Page 79)

quietly now. Long steamjets blew from his lips. "Both my brothers. Dead, one of them; the other screaming his life out."

Alamo said with heat, "I'd kill you, too, if your hand was filled. I want you to know that."

"If I still had a loaded gun. . . " Greer raged and didn't finish.

"Get one," Alamo invited. He arose, Colt on the ready, eyes carefully on this man, wary of a hide-out short-gun. Then the street came alive with the pound of boots as miners poured out of the saloons, and stores and livery stables. The screaming man was silent suddenly, silent forever and the night became intensely still.

"Get one," Alamo repeated. "From your brother. Now."

A murmur rose from the crowd and hate for Greer was in the deep sound.

Greer laughed at it, though the sound reached and shook him inside. Always a powerful, ruthless man, his easy victories over others had made his nature heavily arrogant. His laughter boomed with contempt. He'd had this mob under the palm of his gun hand; he still would have.

He said to Alamo with quiet venom, "No. Not now. Not here. Not this way. I've heard of you. You and your damned hospital and the rest. I'm gonna kill you on your own dueling ground!" His arm swept out. "In front of the whole Washoe. You're gonna die like my brother died—screaming."

The crowd's murmuring became a roar. Alamo read its meaning in a flash and within him was a keen stab of regret for the weakness he was feeling. He knew the way of the frontier. Weakness or no, he had to accept this man's challenge, or else Greer would have these miners even more deeply in fear of him. . .

"Screaming," Greer said again. "I'll take you in half an hour." Then, trembling, "I want to get my brothers."

Alamo glanced at the murmuring crowd. Then he gave Greer a direct glance and said, "Guns?"

"No. Bowie knives."

(Continued On Page 82)

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Famous Western

(Continued From Page 80)

MINUTES later, Alamo was in his Sheriff's office for the first time since he'd enlisted in the Union Army, carrying the Winchester and Colt of the two slain Greer brothers. He hung them on the shelf reserved for the weapons of men he'd vanquished, then moved around the room, staring at the hundreds of vari-shaped guns and knives there, each glance at his collection bringing a flow of memories.

He frowned, selecting a Bowie and tested the blade. Again, weakness dragged within him and he breathed deeply and flexed his arms, trying to flush strength back in him, trying to draw it out of the air with deep, deep breathing. He did not hear Frank Ives and Eve enter the office until the door clicked shut.

Frank Ives said, after praising him excitedly, "But Alamo, what about the church bell—?"

"The bell will come later. The Greers had no time to break it down; a church bell ain't easy to hide." He touched his thumb to the Bowie blade. "First things come first."

"Want me to search Greer's cabin—?"

Alamo reflected a moment. Then, "Go ahead; but, be careful."

"I've heard about you dueling Greer." Eve rushed to him after Ives slammed out the door. "I didn't speak before; I felt it was wrong to. But it isn't wrong now. You can't do it. You're weak; it's all over your face. You can't face that beast's knife—"

Alamo told her sharply there was no other way. He said he would kill Greer or die.

"That's the way I'm made."

She didn't go on, though her heart was protesting savagely. She touched her hand to his face and he felt the warm, urgent gentleness of her and suddenly he hated the memory of the hurt he had brought to this girl. He couldn't believe now it had ever been in him to do so.

He said a thing that was on his mind, said it thickly.

"You're good. You're the girl for me." Then he sheathed his Bowie, spun around and strode out the door.

(Continued On Page 84)

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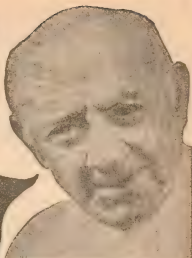
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Famous Western

(Continued From Page 32)

Outside, he glanced back at the window. Yellow light stained it and in its center he saw her face. Both her hands were pressed against it. He did not look back again.

THE snow-waves were gone from the night as he moved down C street toward the dueling ground. Overhead, a slow, full moon was caught and veiled by a lone, speedy layer of cloud. The air was intensely cold and the blue-black sky flashed its gems brightly at the earth.

Alamo was caught then by his feeling for Eve, caught so that he became absolutely still. He felt the movement of his heart. The rich activity of the earth struck him too; it blended with this feeling, he became aware of the snow and stars and air and their mystery and he knew he had never really felt alive before.

He thought how wrong it was to die. He was a man whom fear had never touched, but now he knew a certain fear and there was no shame to it. Life was good; life was worth living. Then he recalled the macabre procession in Abe Rolland's store and Eve's anguish there and anger ran through him like steel. He touched the cold hilt of his Bowie and moved on.

He was a distance removed from the dueling ground when he saw the shadowy block, made by the mass of miners. They blackened each side of the cleared earth, by the thousand. The Washoe was there, en masse. Steam-jets blew from many lips as they roared his name.

"Alamo Jones! Alamo Jones! Take him, Alamo!"

A thrill raced through Alamo at this greeting and his weakness somehow ebbed from him. He watched a piece of the black mass split and form an aisle, then strode swiftly to the cleared earth. He knew Greer would be waiting. There was a sudden silence, in which the thud of his boots made the only sound. He leaped onto the dueling ground, his Bowie high and gleaming.

Greer was waiting. The huge man lunged at him from the extreme end of the cleared earth. His Bowie was

Killers Also Die

a slashing line of light at his shoulder.

Alamo sprang back, but weakness made his leap a slow thing. The slashing line of light met him and played out its stroke and came away, tipped with crimson.

Alamo gasped. The rushing steel had opened the skin of chest from shoulder to shoulder and pain slashed its raw, hot wire there.

"Scream," Greer panted. "Scream."

Alamo didn't scream; he did not have the strength. The wound was not deep, he knew, but weakness seemed to seep through it and flow down and attack his heart. His knife arm sagged.

You gotta be quick. Danger printed itself on his brain. You gotta take him quick or die.

Greer sensed his weakness and played warily with it. He eluded Alamo, kept his Bowie on guard and ready, but motionless and dodged Alamo's rushes skillfully. Alamo lunged at him. He hacked, stroked and stabbed—missed again and again, each stroke faintly losing speed. His breath tore out of him in shuddering gasps and he felt his ebbing strength flow away with each breath. His knife-arm became a massive weight. He let it fall; he could do nothing else. He glared at the huge man.

"Oh, you'll scream," Greer said. His Bowie came alive and shifted delicately in his hand.

Alamo stiffened, feeling the flesh of his chest thicken and become a hard shell. Then the sound of the people reached him. They were roaring, roaring his name and the sound was an enormous thing.

"Alamo Jones! Alamo Jones! Alamo Jones!"

Alamo trembled. The deep, respectful man-sounds flowed at him and thrilled him like a bugle call. His gray eyes flashed and a new rush of energy made his heart pound.

Greer felt the roaring. The feeling was in the sudden twist of his body. He backed up involuntarily, his knife hand stiffening.

"Alamo Jones! Alamo Jones! Alamo Jones!"

Alamo breathed, "Hear them?" and

(Continued On Page 86)



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Famous Western

(Continued From Page 85)

he moved for the huge man, his Bowie going fast. Greer's shift was too slow. They met. Greer hacked at Alamo's knife arm and missed. The blade cut harmlessly past Alamo's shoulder. Then Alamo caught him.

He felt his Bowie break into Greer's chest with his back muscles. He stepped back, sliding his Bowie clear. He watched the huge man shudder and die and sink down on the frozen earth.

AFTER his chest wound was treated, Alamo listened, amazed, to Ives who managed to free him for a moment from the crowd of enthusiastic miners.

"I found the bell all right," Ives expression was grave. "Hidden in Greer's cabin, under a couple of buffalo robes." Then he made a helpless gesture.

Alamo read his face. He remembered the three identical church bells that Preacher Kirk had mentioned in his letter.

He said, "You mean—the jewels weren't in this bell either—"

"No jewels; not one. I had it broken down careful by the blacksmith on Union Street. Reckon this bell's as worthless as the first one that turned up."

"Somewhere," Alamo said softly, "somewhere that third bell is hangin' in a church. And nobody knows what it has."

"Yeah, somewhere. But Lord knows where," Ives shrugged. "That bell's the stuff that dreams are made of."

Somebody in the crowd said then that Alamo's endurance had killed Greer and Alamo Jones smiled. He never expected anyone there to understand, but he said it anyway.

"The people killed Matt Greer. The people are kinda good, you know?" And he wished that Abe Rolland was alive to hear him.

Then he moved off alone into the white night, heading for his office and Eve. She would understand, he thought. He stared up at the sparkling gems of the sky and breathed deeply of the frosty air. He said to the high bright stars, "It's good to be alive."

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Parley at Whiskey Creek

(Continued From Page 59)

Pistol Frank's lips curled away from his teeth. His eyes switched to his discarded guns. Then he shrugged. "All right. . ."

AT A steady hand loped, the posse moved through the night back to Mogollon Flats. They were keeping their word they had given to Parson Andrews. After all, when you made a promise to a man with so much dang nerve. . . Up front, beside the sheriff, Pistol Frank hummed cheerfully, confident he would be found innocent at the trial. When they drew up in a hollow for a breather, Mundy rolled a quirkly for the handcuffed Pistol Frank and fired it up. Mundy could still hardly believe it had come off.

"Still cain't figure how you come to surrender to that parson, Frank," he said. "I figured you'd blast him when he got inside. Or mebbe use him as a hostage."

Frank Land exhaled smoke. "Couldn't hardly do that with my own brother, sheriff."

"Your—your brother? Big Joe Land? But he—"

Pistol Frank nodded. "That was him, sheriff. Didn't know it myself till he came in. He's shed a heap of weight, so it's no wonder you didn't recognize him. 'Andrews' is the name of our mother's family, you see."

Mundy digested that. "I'll be danged! Well—Big Joe himself, eh. Still, how even he got you to surrender, him being unarmed and—"

Pistol Frank chuckled. "Unarmed? Like hell he was. He waited till I put my guns down, then let me see that .41 Gambler's Special he toted in a special pocket in the waistband of his pants. It was come out or git drilled in there—for me."

They rode on a couple of miles before the sheriff spoke again. "Frank, mebbe—well, mebbe it'd be better if we let folks think he was unarmed and talked you into coming out. Folks believe in that parson."

Pistol Frank grinned under the moon, then nodded. "Sure. He's one convincing fella. . ."

(THE END)

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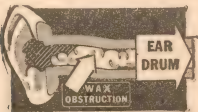
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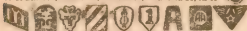
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Code of the Rimrocks

(Continued From Page 55)

north of Deadwood, but there was no horse.

A month later Ike was on the Great Northern. He had boarded her at Billings after withdrawing his three hundred. Almost simultaneously he became a frightened man. He had to go all the way to New York to reach Dramat's headquarters.

He wasn't frightened of Dramat, just bitterly angry. But the wilds and the canyons and the loneliness of New York were frightening. This, to Ike, was the great Deadlands.

And it became just that to Alexander Dramat, the millionaire manufacturer of canned dog food.

Witnesses said later he simply answered a ring at his apartment door and a voice said: "Draw," then later, "Turn around." The latter command was followed by two heavy shots; nobody saw the gunman. They commented on the unhurried evenness of his footsteps as he nonchalantly walked away. There was something about the sound of them that was remindful of a slippered monk walking back to his vestry after doing a good turn.

The New York police never solved that killing, never were able to find a reason for it.

As for Ike he doesn't come out of the Deadlands much. He says he's getting old and that he's got an old pal in there whom he gets along with tolerable well. But folks discount that because as the years pass nobody yet has seen Ike's pal.

(THE END)

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STATES
SAVINGS
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AND
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Digger John's Bet

(Continued From Page 46)

They approached Slim Deakins and he said he'd pay if he lost. They approached Digger and he said the same and said he could pay a wash-tub of gold if necessary.

The owner of Dredgers then demanded to know the terms of the bet, before he could let the drinks go any farther.

"It's like this. You know that flag-pole out there?" he paused. "We. . . ll, I helped plant that pole. Deep into the earth we dug and we braced it with rock 'til I don't think it'll ever fall down, but that Slim, he says when it falls, it'll fall South and I say it'll fall North. When it falls, you come around and let us know. . . 'cause if it falls South I'm goin' to crawl right outa my grave and pay you fer all them drinks you've been givin' away!"

(THE END)



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Nester

(Continued From Page 40)

and that will be for the best. When a bunch of cowards ride behind masks, then the country is rotten to the core, and—"

"I said to shut up!" Kane roared.

But dad wouldn't stop. "You've burned me out, as you've done others; but you can't burn-out everybody. You can't isolate yourselves out here, saying the rest of the people don't matter. This is one country, just like some day it will be one world. People have got to live together, in peace, and if it takes guns to make you understand that at first, then guns you will face."

Brickle's Colt was in his hand, and he leaned forward, waiting for an order.

"Drop it, Brickle," and heavy voice smashed. "Drop it or I drop you."

LOOKED around and saw that Sheriff Gratton had his gun out and lined on Brickle. His mask was off, and I could see the craggy lines of his face.

"Gratton—" Kane began.

"Shut up, Kane," the Sheriff said. "I'm getting a bit sick of murder." His voice lashed at Brickle. "Goddam it, I said drop that gun!"

Brickle's Colt hit the ground. He was swearing, and the hate in his face could have killed the Sheriff.

"You forgetting who put you in office?" Kane said harshly, half-turning in the saddle.

"I ain't forgetting nothing, not a thing," Sheriff Gratton said. "It makes my belly crawl."

He danced his horse out of the crowd, and faced it, gun steady in his hands.

"I'm through as of this minute," he said coldly. "I've taken my last order from any of you. When a little man like this can face a mob like us; when he can take what he's taken, and still talk sense, then somebody's wrong. And I'm thinking it's us. Now, on your way, all of you. And let me tell you something; the man who causes trouble here again answers to me."

"Gratton—" Kane began.

The Sheriff's gun bored a shot into the ground.

Nester

"I said move," he snapped.

I didn't understand it. I saw only the Sheriff sitting his horse, and men beginning to drift into the night. Brickle still stood beside dad and Mom and hadn't moved.

"You want it now, Brickle?" the Sheriff said, and the gunman shook his head, backing off, and swung onto his horse. A minute later, he too was gone after the nightriders.

"Why should you—" Mom began, and the Sheriff shrugged.

"Forget it, Missus Miller," he said. "I'm sorry for what's happened, but that can't be undid now. However, I'll see that men come out to help put up a new place." He looked at dad. "Mister," he finished, "I wish I had your guts."

He swung his horse and rowelled it into movement. A moment later, he was gone into the night, the moonlight barely disclosing his silhouette. It was then I heard the slight pod-pod of hooves on the ground. I darted to where Brickle's gun lay and swung it around at the horseman who drifted into the light of the glowing cabin embers. It was Old man Lunt, and his mask still hung around his skinny throat.

"Miller," he said evenly, "you'll need a bit of credit until the crops come in. I've got nails and food and the like."

He clucked his tongue, and the horse walked out of the circle of light. Then the hoofbeats picked up, and we were alone.

Mom was crying, and dad was looking into the night as though he didn't understand. I still held Dottie with one arm, and Brickle's gun sagged the wrist of the other. Burning wood crackled and popped behind us, but we gave it no heed.

"They're gone, dad," I said at last.

I saw Mom go into dad's arms, and far away a coyote keened to the moon. Dottie watched the fire and clapped her hands, and I let the gun fall to the ground. I didn't really understand what had happened.

"There will still be trouble, Walter," Mom said to dad, and he nodded.

"Some," he said, "but we'll be careful." He grinned through the mask

(Continued On Page 96)

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Famous Western

(Continued From Page 95)

of blood and bruised flesh. "But we won't be fighting alone any longer."

I saw the riders top the far horizon and disappear, and suddenly I was afraid no longer.

"Gee, dad, that means we stay?" I asked.

He laughed, and his laughter touched the stars with its promise.

"We stay," he said. "We stay, and others will come. This is our home."

I think I saw then, faintly, what the Sheriff and Old man Lunt and my mother had seen in dad. It was a good thing, and I hoped some day it would be mine.

Some day, when courts, not men, ruled this land of ours.

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